

Six Trends in Public Thinking about Work in the United States



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Is the current system of work in the United States—which many experience as insecure, unequal, and disempowering—amenable to a fundamental power shift in favor of workers, away from corporations and the wealthy? That is the question at the heart of an ongoing FrameWorks investigation, part of our multi-year WorkShift program, designed to develop a strategy for reframing work and labor that builds public support for change.

A sharp rise in income inequality, wage stagnation, and continuing occupational segregation over the past 50 years have resulted in an over-representation of women, people of color, migrants, and youth in lower status, poorly paid jobs. Yet we're beginning to see some promising trends, with improvements in work-life balance, major legislation promoting job creation, and strong union support. This is a moment where there is an opening for bigger conversations about changes to how we work.

To build support for structural change, we need to connect public thinking around work and worker power to a broader vision of economic justice. We must first understand existing cultural mindsets around work—the underlying, durable patterns of thinking that shape how people think, feel and act—and what those mindsets mean for advocates communicating for a more just future of work.

Through in-depth research with a cross-section of the American public, including 50 two-hour interviews and three large national surveys, we have learned that:¹

- Thinking about work tends to be dominated by a cluster of unproductive mindsets that are individualistic and embrace the status quo as natural—such as the concept of the self-made individual.
- People widely assume that all work has a critical purpose, which prevents consideration of whether and how labor systems should be different. While people can see that the government and labor unions can have some role in shaping outcomes for workers, their role is not well understood.
- People recognize that structural factors shape opportunities for work, and sometimes, people understand that the status and pay of jobs are shaped by classism. However the role of structural racism in shaping work is not widely understood and sometimes actively rejected—particularly by white Americans.

While some of these findings present challenges for communicators, we find significant opportunity to connect to available, if recessive, structural mindsets. In particular, there is potential to build a deeper understanding of how structural oppression shapes the value society places on different industries, who holds which jobs, and how people experience the workplace. To shift power in favor of workers, rather than corporations and the wealthy, these are the kinds of mindsets we need to strengthen through our narratives about work.

Our [full report](#) outlines emerging insights and how communicators might progress framing strategies in this direction. As we continue the project, we will explore how people's thinking shifts in response to how issues of work and labor are framed. Until then, here are six important trends to inform your narrative strategies.

About this project

This is one of several reports emerging from the first phase of the FrameWorks Institute's multi-year [WorkShift program](#). Through this project we will develop a strategy for reframing work and labor that builds public support for the restructuring of our labor systems needed to counter exploitation and create a just and sustainable society—with a particular focus on care work and manufacturing.

FINDING #1

Two Clusters of Mindsets about Work Are Available to People

What We're Finding

Mindsets on work tend to fit into two concurrent, competing, and available orientations.

1. **Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary.** These mindsets center on the role and responsibility of individuals in determining their own success, and see features of society as natural and inevitable. This upholds the status quo, and tends to preserve existing power relations between groups.
2. **Collective, Structural, and Designed.** These mindsets take a wider lens, recognizing how collective actions and decisions shape outcomes, and bringing into view how structural factors shape work (like structural racism or sexism). This set of mindsets enables contestation of the status quo and recognition of the need for and possibility of structural change.

Both clusters of mindsets are available to all members of the public, and people move back and forth between them, seeing things sometimes from within one perspective, sometimes from within the other. They describe ways of thinking, not sets of people. They are also linked in important ways with policy outcomes. Stronger endorsement of mindsets in the *Collective, Structural, and Designed* cluster tends to be accompanied by stronger endorsement of progressive policies—like a federal jobs guarantee, increasing the top rate of taxation, or making it easier to form and join unions—which does not tend to be the case for *Individualist, Naturalistic, and Reactionary* mindsets.

What It Tells Us

While individualistic thinking tends to be more dominant and frequently accessed in conversations about work, our survey findings reveal that collective mindsets are both available, and endorsed when cued. There is therefore an opportunity to widen people's lens from an individualistic understanding of work to a systems approach, and connect issues of work with the more productive *Collective, Structural, and Designed* mindsets.

FINDING #2

The “Self-Made Individual” Mindset Is Central—but People Can Think Structurally about Opportunity

What We're Finding

The concept of the *Self-Makingness*—the assumption that individuals can succeed if they work hard, or fail if not—is foundational to how most people make sense of work. According to this way of thinking, everyone has potential, and it's up to the individual whether they make something of themselves. By assuming that the economy is meritocratic, this mindset obscures how our collective choices structure work and constrain an individual's ability to succeed through forces such as poverty and racism.

However, when we zoom out from jobs and ask people to think more generally about patterns of financial success in society, we see an interesting and quite dramatic shift: *Self-Makingness* drops off, and structural thinking comes more to the fore. In our surveys, alongside our measure of *Self-Makingness*, we asked participants to choose between different explanations of how groups of people become financially successful—a *Self-Makingness* explanation, and a structural explanation, as follows:

- *Self-Makingness*: “People who are financially successful are well-off because of their own talent and/or hard work.”
- *Opportunity Structures*: “Some people and groups do better than others financially because of differences in opportunity, not talent or effort.”

In this forced choice question, we found that participants tended to choose Opportunity Structures over *Self-Makingness*. This was the case in our surveys, despite *Self-Makingness* being most dominant and front of mind in conversations about work. This shows that productive structural thinking is not just available, but that it even has the potential to become more dominant than individualistic thinking when the contrast is presented.

What It Tells Us

There is opportunity to shift the emphasis from self-made success to opportunity structures, particularly if we widen the lens and ask people to think about the economy as a whole rather than jobs, and groups of people rather than individuals. Our survey results confirm that structural thinking about opportunity correlates with the kinds of policy outcomes we want to achieve, such as a federal minimum wage increase and universal public child care access. Communicators will need to deepen people's understanding of structural inequities—in particular, connect structural racism more firmly with opportunity—and offer concrete ideas about how these inequities can be addressed to create a new vision of work.

FINDING #3

Why Do People End up in Particular Jobs? It's “Natural” (and Gendered)

What We're Finding

When thinking about why we end up in particular jobs, people tend to draw on individualistic and naturalistic mindsets. A common explanation is that people go into jobs that line up with their personality traits or physical strengths. Relatedly, men and women are sometimes thought of as being inherently, biologically suited to different jobs—a *Gender Essentialism* mindset. Although participants might espouse a belief that anyone of any gender could do any job, they would often explain gendered workplace patterns in the context of natural attributes: For instance, women are more caring and men physically stronger. When thinking about gender and work in this way, the over-representation of women or men in a given industry is seen as natural.

The extent to which people seem willing to explicitly endorse gender essentialist ideas in conversations about work is notable, and marks a departure from our research in other areas. For instance, when people talk about housekeeping and domestic responsibilities, they are more likely to outwardly reject the idea that men and women are suited to different roles, arguing that labor in the home is and should be increasingly equal.² This likely reflects social codes about what people think is acceptable to express. While gender essentialism operates in people's thinking across the spheres of work and home, people seem more ready to express and endorse this when it comes to the formal workplace.

What It Tells Us

It's not enough to simply point out that men or women are over-represented in certain fields, because that can easily be explained with reference to natural, biological differences. Instead, communicators can point to sexist policy decisions and explain how they have shaped patterns of who is working in what jobs, and how much those workers are valued and paid.

FINDING #4**The Role of Government in Shaping Work Is Poorly Understood****What We're Finding**

While people often assume that the government should protect workers, there is a lack of understanding about the government's role in shaping work, or what the government should do differently. Work is generally thought to perform a necessary function for individuals and society, but people are not clear on *how* or *why* jobs are created—if they consider it at all. The role of government in constructively shaping work does not come readily to mind. Rather, the government can be thought of as a dysfunctional and interfering force, meddling with the “invisible hand” of the market. Even when people see a role for the government to do something for workers, there is not strong consensus on what types of policies the government could implement.

What It Tells Us

Communicators can begin by talking about the economy as designed. In [our related research on the economy](#), we find that members of the public can and (increasingly) *do* think about the economy as a designed system, so there is an opportunity to strengthen this thinking, and connect it explicitly to work.³ Communicators can do this by illustrating the role of government in shaping work through policy decisions and investments. Several productive mindsets about government can be drawn upon to explain the need for major policy changes around work, including the widely understood role of government as a protector of workers and a provider for people.

FINDING #5**Avoiding, Dismissing, and Denying Structural Racism****What We're Finding**

The role of structural racism in shaping work is not widely understood, particularly by white Americans. While people sometimes recognize that racism happens in the workplace, they tend to draw on interpersonal mindsets of racism (focusing on how people talk and behave to each other at work) rather than structural mindsets (focusing on how racism in society leads to patterns of occupational segregation and racialized exploitation).

In our interviews, connections between racism and work were rarely spontaneously raised, and when asked about, participants—particularly white participants—would sometimes reject the idea that structural racism disadvantages people of color at work. Several mindsets, such as “*Class Not Race*” (where disadvantage at work is thought to be more connected to class than it is to race) or *Reverse Racism Is the New Racism* (where people of color are assumed to have advantages that white people do not) serve to diminish or deny current and pressing problems of structural racism.

What It Tells Us

Since many people do not connect structural racism with work at all, communicators must first find effective ways to build understanding of how policies and institutions perpetuate racial injustice, which shapes the work people do and how it's valued. As above, merely noting disparities in outcomes is not enough. Efforts should serve to pivot from a more individualistic to a structural understanding of work, and explain how disparities in opportunities stem from structural racism. Those explanations should explain specifically how patterns of occupational segregation have resulted from design—rather than accident or nature—as well as how they have been perpetuated, and how they can be disrupted.

FINDING #6

Tension in Thinking about Unions

What We're Finding

People tend to assume that workers are stronger when they come together, and that unions can be a vehicle for building power and making change. However, people also at times think of unions as fundamentally self-interested, corrupt, or inept. When thinking in this way, unions are understood as being an independent “third party” that sits between workers and employers, rather than being composed of workers themselves.

What It Tells Us

While people can reflect on the helpful or unhelpful function of unions, there is little understanding of how unions work and what they can do to effect change, beyond going on strike. Communicators have an opportunity to fill these gaps in understanding and, in particular, challenge the third partying of unions by building more understanding of what workers can achieve when they join together in a union. This involves being specific about mechanisms that unions can use to leverage and maintain power (for instance, through securing contracts), and giving tangible examples of where working people have come together to improve their lives and secure better wages, benefits and working conditions.

What's Next?

The next step in the Work/Shift program will be to develop and test frames that can shift public thinking about work and labor in the United States. We will build upon, and hone, these emerging recommendations, and also test some of the framing strategies currently being used by the field. Our focus will be on diminishing the current dominance of *Individualist*, *Naturalistic*, and *Reactionary* mindsets, and instead connecting issues of work more firmly with the more productive *Collective*, *Structural*, and *Designed* mindsets.



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WorkShift is guided by an advisory board of advocates, scholars, organizers, and other stakeholders, composed of: Lina Stepick, Jaimie Worker, Vicki Shabo, Chirag Mehta, Chris Zepada-Millan, Jason Tomlinson, Livia Lam, Marc Bayard, Stephen Herzenberg, and Ruth Milkman. Read more about our advisory board here. We thank the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Square One Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, and the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation for their generous support.

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Endnotes

1. For more detail on our methodology, see the Methods Supplement accompanying this report.
2. FrameWorks Institute. (2023). *Three Things to Know about How Americans are Thinking about Gender*. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CCP-Gender-and-Government-Docs-v2.pdf>
3. FrameWorks Institute. (2022). *How Is Culture Changing in This Time of Social Upheaval? Findings from the Culture Change Project*. <https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/how-is-culture-changing-in-this-time-of-social-upheaval/>



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