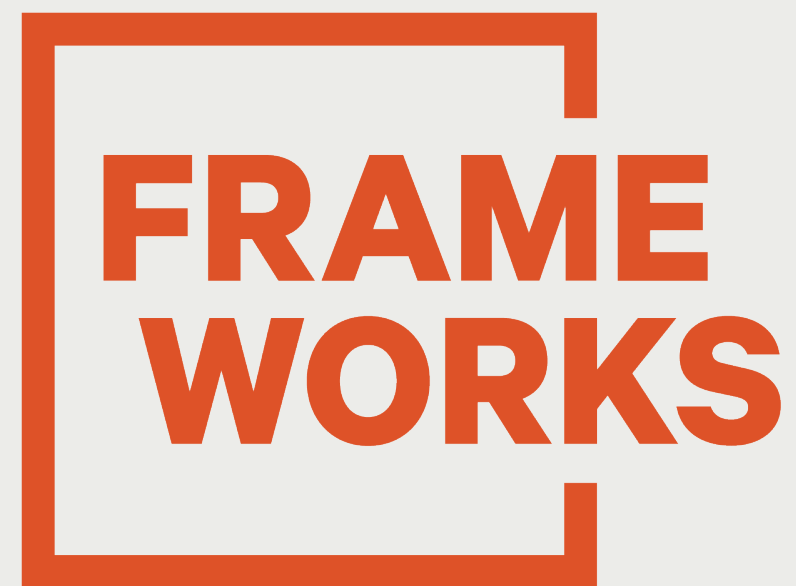


Strategic Storytelling in Constrained Environments

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Julie Sweetland, PhD, Senior Advisor

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Poll

**How confident are you
in using storytelling
as part of your advocacy work?**

Here's how we'll share space today

- **We are recording today's session.**
- **We will share the recording and slides with registrants as soon as we can.**
- We will remove any AI note-takers.
- To bring a question or comment to the presenters' attention, **use the Q&A function.** Note that others in the meeting will be able to see your question.
- **Presenters probably won't see the chat.** The chat is open for participants to interact with each other or respond to content in real time. FrameWorks may also post links there.
- Presenters will pause in the middle, and at the end, to hear from you and respond to questions.
- For general reactions, please feel free to use the reaction feature.

**We can't achieve
health justice without
powerful
communication.**

FrameWorks' Health Justice Program is designed to support the field (you!)



Original Research



Framing & Narrative
Strategy



Deep Reframing
Partnerships

Today's session

The mechanics of narrative

Storytelling techniques to reveal injustice

Storytelling techniques to move the unpersuaded

Discussion and wrap-up



Criscillia Benford
Senior Fellow



Julie Sweetland
Senior Advisor

The mechanics of story

The shape of our stories shape what people believe is possible for our communities



“Narrative has never been merely entertainment for me. It is, I believe, one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge.”

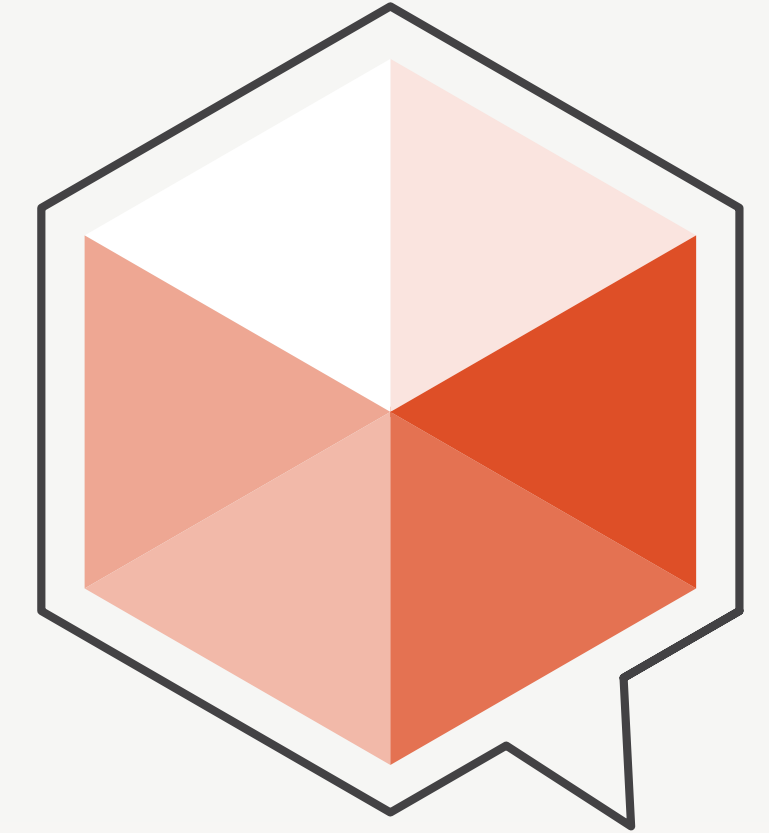
Dr. Toni Morrison (1931 - 2019)

Nobel Laureate and Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Humanities, Emeritus at Princeton University

Why tell a story?

- to engage people's attention
- to make facts (20 times!) more memorable
- to facilitate re-telling
- to transport people into other situations
- to humanize complex issues

Narrative | Story



	Definition	Example
Narratives	Are templates: recurring patterns of meaning that cut across stories and tie them together	<i>A template.</i> In the “health epiphany” narrative, an individual comes to view their body or health status in a negative light, embarks on a period of effortful self-transformation, and ultimately validates that transformation through visible bodily change.
Stories	Are tales about particular events and people; may be true or fictional	<i>A telling.</i> In the TV show <i>The Biggest Loser</i> , contestants described their bodies as shameful, engaged in intensive self-transformation regimes, and treated dramatic weight loss as proof of self-control, redemption, and merit.

Setting

lets us show how systems work or fail

Characters

let us show capacities, values, skills

Framing Opportunities

Plot

lets us show that collective action is real, attainable, and effective

Point of view

lets us amplify the perspectives of people facing health injustices

Many stories, told well, can **change the narrative**

Community Storytelling Efforts

Authentic (often grassroots)
stories that elevate new
perspectives on a topic for
local audiences

Narrative Shift Efforts

Collective, extended
efforts to broadly reshape
public discourse, thinking,
and decisions on a
particular topic



Let's chat

Any questions, comments, or other reactions?



Exposing injustice without jargon

How to build stories that reveal systemic barriers and point to structural solutions

Stories offer
“side doors”
into suppressed topics



Thematic stories point people to structural solutions

Episodic Stories (Portrait)

Setting: An individual's life

Character: Individuals

Plot: Overcoming a personal trouble

Forward motion: Personal psychology

Solutions: Inspiration, motivation

Takeaway: Fix the people



Thematic Stories (Panorama)

Setting: Community/social conditions

Characters: Groups

Plot: Solving a shared problem

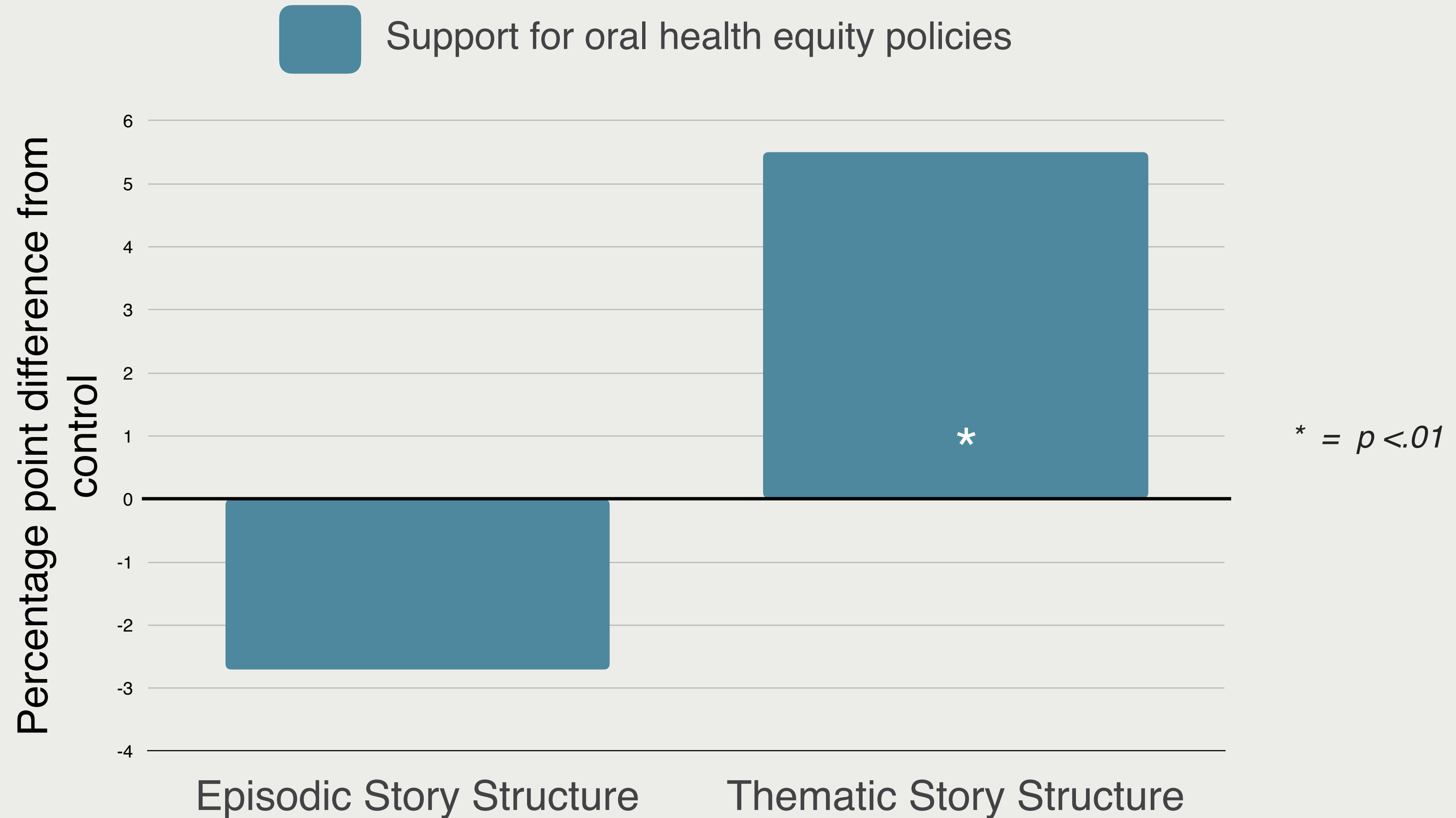
Forward motion: Shared goals

Solutions: Engagement, advocacy

Takeaway: Fix the conditions

Thematic stories boost support for health equity

Findings from a FrameWorks national survey experiment on oral health - 2017



A narrative template for health justice success stories

Narrative feature This feature lets us frame... What happens in this narrative “beat”

Setting	How systems work (or fail)	A problem in our community revealed a gap between current conditions and our shared
Character	Capacities, values, skills	A group of us came together to stop a problem from causing further harm to our community.
Action (Plot)	Collective action is real, attainable, and effective	We contributed our different perspectives, resources, skills, and expertise.
Outcome (Change)	There are solutions beyond problems	Solving the problem helped us realize the aspirations we have for our community.
Takeaway (Moral)	The values and aspirations we want to elevate	We can all learn from this.

Filling out a narrative template

Narrative feature **The template: What happens in this narrative “beat”** **The telling: How the story comes to life**

Setting	A problem in our community revealed a gap between current conditions and our values.	Elementary kids seeing dozens of ads for commercial tobacco on the way to school.
Character	A group of us came together to stop a problem from causing further harm to our community.	Families Association notices 6th grade suspensions for vaping - joins forces with Health Coalition.
Action (Plot)	We contributed our different perspectives, resources, skills, and expertise.	Coalition develops model zoning regulation to restrict sales near schools. Family association gets room parents to organize.
Outcome (Change)	Solving the problem helped us realize the aspirations we have for our community.	Zoning restriction passed by a landslide. No sales near schools reduces pressure from ads.
Takeaway (Moral)	We can all learn from this.	Listening to concerns of community members + tapping into community strengths & skills = healthier environments

Americans are deeply dissatisfied with the state of our country—but aren't sure what change should look like.

We can — and must — help people see that a better future is



Engaging the unpersuaded

How to craft stories that move audiences who aren't yet bought into health equity

Framing Fix

Point to Shared Humanity

- ✓ Avoid language that limits view of who is “deserving”
- ✓ Use a broad, inclusive “we” to emphasize connection
- ✓ Reinforce the ideal of respect for human dignity

If you're used to telling 'worthiness' stories

Helen worked her entire life — first as a teacher, then as a caregiver for her aging parents. She paid into Social Security, volunteered in her community, and never asked for help. Now in her late 70s, she is facing serious health challenges. But when she tried to sign up for in-home care, she was told the waitlist was over a year long. After a lifetime of contribution, Helen is being denied essential care. People like Helen shouldn't be left to fend for themselves when they've earned the right to be supported.



Try stories that call for systems that treat everyone with dignity

Helen's story reminds us that aging with dignity isn't just a matter of poise — it's a matter of public policy. Now in her late 70s, Helen could age in place with a home health aide and transportation assistance. Instead, she'll need to move to a facility some distance from her home, due to policy decisions that let critical programs like Medicaid home-care fall into disrepair. By listening to people like Helen, we can build systems that allow us all stay connected to our communities as we age - and envision a future where policies and programs treat everyone with dignity.

Framing Fix

Highlight Agency & Expertise

- ✓ Show how people's experiences yield knowledge and insights
- ✓ Connect personal perspectives to systemic solutions
- ✓ Intentionally disrupt harmful stereotypes and toxic narratives

If you're used to telling 'crisis' stories

When home- and community-based care programs were slashed through the “One Big Beautiful Bill Act,” Gloria lost the aide who helped her manage medications and meals safely. Reduced transportation meant she missed medical appointments, too. These policy choices left Gloria vulnerable, turning a short-sighted political choice into a cascading health crisis. The worst - sadly - is yet to come.



Try showing agency in times of urgency

When Medicaid cuts disrupted Gloria's home care, she recognized the loss of essential health services for what it was: a policy choice to prioritize immediate cost-cuts over long-term wellbeing. She connected with others facing similar consequences and advocated for reinstating transportation and home health aides. Through her organizing, she's showing us how to stand up for a future where we can all age with dignity.

Framing Fix

Tell a story that shows how we got here

- ✓ Use a past-present-future story structure to make the case for equity-focused approaches
- ✓ For best results: look for specific, local, and (relatively) recent policy decisions that caused uneven and unfair health environments or outcomes
- ✓ Use cause-and-effect language to tightly connect the past decision to present-day consequences for health

Frame health disparities in terms of past, present, future

Past

Speak to history. Give specific examples of historical policies that help to explain contemporary health disparities.



Present

Connect the past to the present. Show how the prior policy established conditions that help to explain health disparities now.



Future

Point to the future. Offer an aspirational vision of the desired end state, showing what it could look like if we took action.

The past-present-future sequence can be used across health topics

Past

For decades, the tobacco industry saturated communities with free products, giving away cigarettes to children, hospitalized people, and service members — and sparking nicotine dependence.

Present

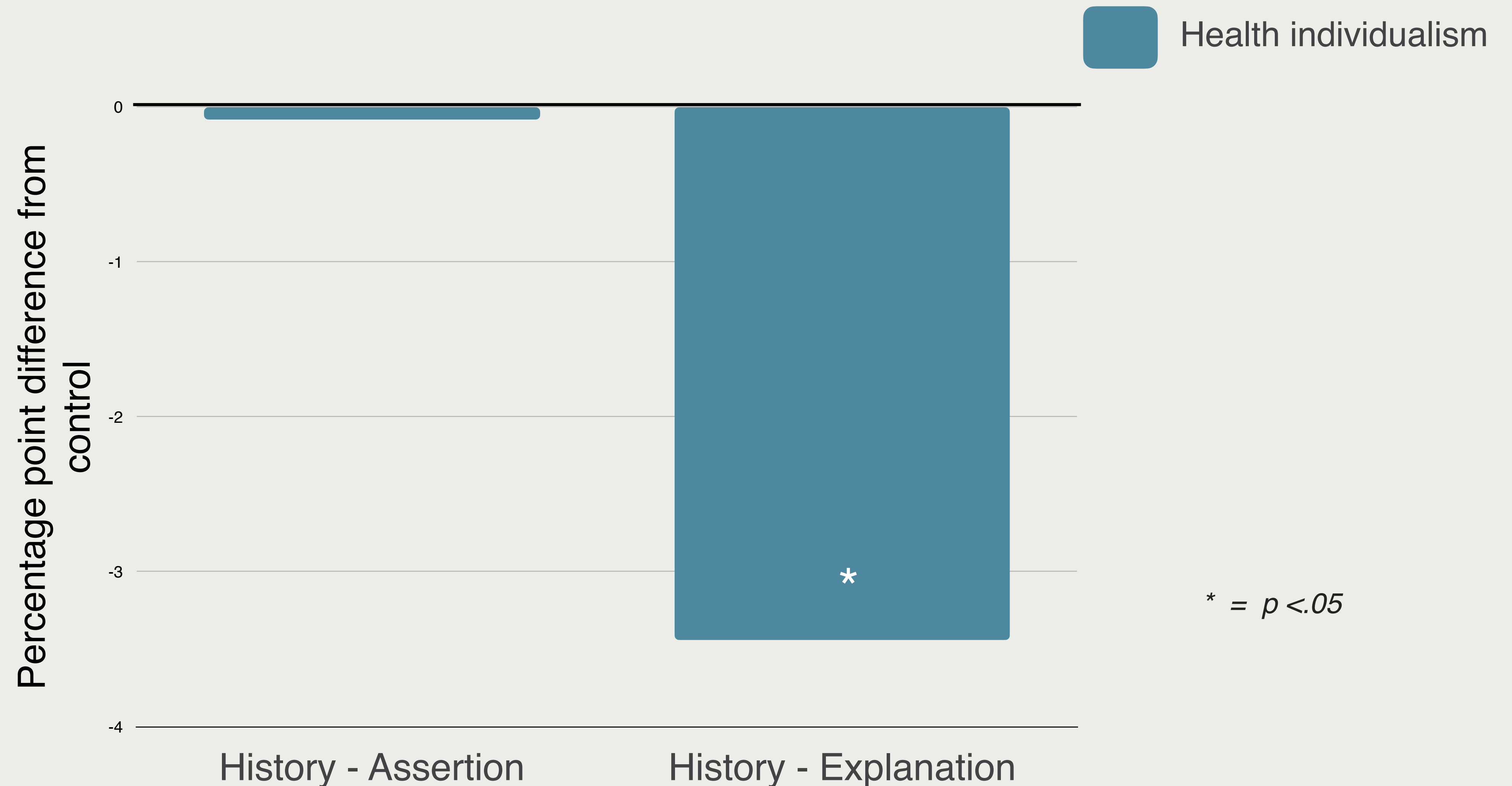
When advocates successfully pushed to outlaw giveaways, industry switched to discounts. Tobacco companies now spend nearly \$8 billion a year to keep their products cheap and visible — because they know that marketing plays a major role in whether people start to use their dangerous products.

Future

Across the nation, communities are standing up and demanding stronger protections. As more jurisdictions adopt bans on coupons, buy-one-get-one sales, and other pricing gimmicks, we'll see people living longer, healthier lives.

Explaining history well reduces health individualism

Findings from a FrameWorks controlled survey experiment on health equity framing, national sample with rural oversample, December 2023



**What's on your mind
and what's next?**

Let's chat

Any questions, comments, or other reactions?



**We want to hear from
you**

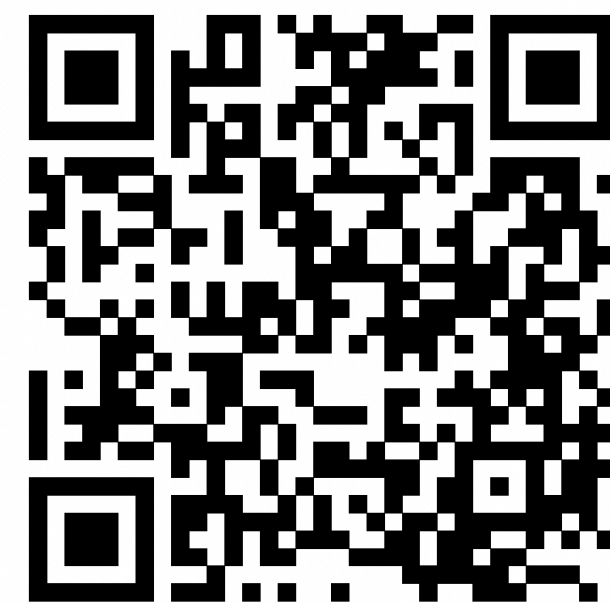


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Health Justice Framing Forum
Wednesday, July 15
10am PT / 1pm ET

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