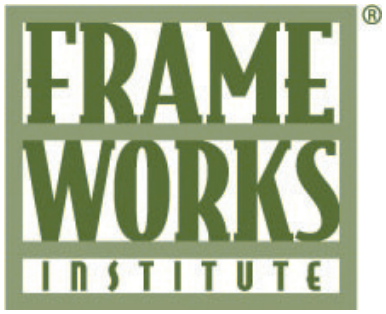

Fitness as a Personal Ideal

Findings from Cognitive Elicitations in Colorado and Chicago

A FrameWorks Research Report

November 2006

INTRODUCTION

The research reported on here was conceived as a bridge between a previous stage of research and one that will follow on this work. The previous project, undertaken by the FrameWorks Institute for The California Endowment, was an investigation of Californians' patterns of reasoning about the connections between health and community. The current research on thinking about fitness – conducted in Colorado and Chicago – continues the exploration of many of the same topics, as well as extending into some additional conceptual areas.

The work that will follow on this project, undertaken by the FrameWorks Institute on behalf of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, includes the development and testing of a "simplifying model" related to fitness – i.e. a brief, user-friendly *explanation* that allows lay people to gain some of the perspective (and engagement) of insiders and experts.

The contents of this report, then, include both a new exploration of Americans' default patterns of thinking related to fitness and a set of hypotheses that emerge from this research, regarding explanatory strategies that might be most effective in helping people reason about food and fitness in more productive ways. In our experience, the second of these stages cannot proceed effectively without the first.

The rationale for both the exploratory work and the development of more effective explanatory strategies is that the public's thinking on many issues is derailed by default patterns of reasoning and understanding *that stand in the way of both engagement and learning*. Even for informed citizens who "know better" in some sense, it is very easy for thinking to be derailed by stubborn patterns of thinking that get in the way. This report is both an exploration of those patterns, and a first step towards a tool that can address them.

SUMMARY

In this section, we summarize both the key strategic points from the research findings, as well as the main hypotheses that emerged regarding *explanatory messages* that might move the public conversation forward on the topic of food and fitness.

Thinking that transcends geography

One of the key findings from the research is that there are important patterns shared between Chicago and Colorado – locations that would seem to be as far apart with respect to fitness as they are geographically. While geography certainly has some effect on people's associations with the topic of fitness, the most important patterns that emerged from the elicitations were shared by subjects in both locations. These probably characterize an understanding of fitness that is shared by all Americans, though with different emphases and nuances.

Revealing contradictions

Several striking contradictory views emerged from the research. For instance, people often attribute Americans' lack of fitness to two nearly opposite problems:

> People are too busy and hardworking to focus on fitness.
>
> People are too lazy to focus on fitness.

A similar contradiction concerns the place of fitness in American culture and values. People strongly express the following two points of view:

> Americans are unconcerned with fitness (look at how overweight we are).
>
> Americans put a strong emphasis on fitness (look at the constant messages from the media).

Many subjects expressed all of these ideas, and the contradictions reflect underlying confusion and ambivalence about the topic – and the need for some clear messages that can help organize public discussion and thinking.

Fitness as a Hobby

From one perspective, fitness can be dismissed as something like a hobby that interests only a particular subgroup of the population. The elicitations suggest that this perspective may be more popular among older Americans.

Fitness and savings accounts – the "Personal Ideal Frame"

More importantly, even the common "positive" perspectives about fitness have serious limitations: When Americans do recognize the importance of fitness, their thinking about the topic is generally guided by an understanding that can be called the "Personal Ideal" frame. In many respects, Americans think about staying or getting "fit" in the same way they think about *depositing some money in their savings account every month*. For most people it's more a personal ideal than a successful practice. The parallels between fitness and monthly savings include:

- It is important in principle.
- It is recognized as a societal value – people know others find it important and we all know we are "supposed" to take it seriously.
- Achieving it involves sacrifice and unpleasantness.
- Everyone knows that it's difficult – partly because of constant temptations around us – and we don't expect everyone to be good at it.
- Despite its importance, it often remains a relatively low priority in practice.
- Individual choices are visible while systemic factors are not – there is no causal role or responsibility for communities, governments.
- The issue is understood almost entirely in "mental" terms (i.e. it relates to people's knowledge, attitudes, character, priorities, etc.) as opposed to "material" terms (i.e. factors such as availability of particular foods, urban design and public transportation, etc.).
- It can be hard to even imagine what policy solutions might be like.
- The implications are individual – communities and governments have no stake.
- We are ambivalent about new information – it is "helpful" but also tiresome and guilt-inducing.
- We all know there are extreme cases of "failure" (poverty or bankruptcy in the case of savings, obesity and heart attacks in the case of fitness).

The "good news" is that health advocates are succeeding in raising the topic of fitness to such prominence in American culture – for many, it is as important as putting money into savings for the future. The "bad news" is that the powerfully dominant frame treats fitness as a *personal* issue, and obscures any active role for government, community and industry.

No "big picture" messages about the role of industries or governments, for instance, have so far succeeded in changing the public conversation in any significant way.

Obesity as an ineffective cognitive "tool"

While there has been a fair amount of media coverage of the obesity "epidemic" in the U.S., and of the need for collective approaches to addressing the problem, the elicitations

suggest that Americans have not picked up on these messages. Instead, obesity is consistently understood as either a personal failure, a personal choice (in the sense that people do not mind being obese), or the result of a personal lack of awareness. The issue, in other words, has not served to create a bigger-picture understanding or conversation about fitness.

Stubbornness of the problem

The elicitations research found not only that the Personal Ideal frame guides Americans' thinking about fitness much of the time, but also that it is extremely hard to shift people away from this pattern of thinking, even if they are educated and concerned. The Personal Idea understanding of fitness is so compatible with cognitive tendencies to think in "little picture," everyday terms – as well as with the American ethic of personal responsibility – that it is extremely difficult to dislodge. The fact that it is also reinforced by both popular discourse (particularly advertising) and everyday emotional experience (i.e. feelings about food and body) makes the challenge of displacing it even greater.

Towards a simplifying model

The elicitations research suggested a number of explanatory strategies that may have the potential to enrich the public conversation about fitness and drive it in more productive directions – i.e. away from the Personal Ideal frame.

While these directions would need to be further explored and refined, as well as empirically tested, each of them may have the potential to address an important gap in the public's current reasoning about the issue.

Work and fitness

One of the few areas where Americans are consistently able to recognize circumstantial factors related to fitness is the world of *work*. They see that various aspects of work – including its often sedentary nature, long hours, long commutes by car, short meal-breaks, etc. – make it harder for workers (i.e. most of us) to get or stay fit. They also recognize various ways in which employers can make it easier, from providing equipment to incentives to time. Finally, they often recognize that employers *benefit* when workers are fit. For all these reasons, an effective explanatory strategy might focus on the concrete connections between work and fitness.

Ecological view

There are many ways to convey the critical but missing insight that our health and fitness are significantly affected by our environment (in a broad sense – including the availability of foods, the layout of neighborhoods, etc.). Potentially effective explanatory avenues would include discussions of how our environment is "engineered" to promote fitness (or not), ways in which the environment pushes us towards or away from health, ways in which the environment stacks the odds against fitness, ways in which there is a

bad fit between our environment and our genes (including our natural craving for fat, salt, sugar), and so forth.

The food industry

Naturally, it would be helpful if Americans had a clearer understanding of the role of the food industry in creating the conditions for health and fitness. One very obvious point from the insider perspective is that the industry's central function is to turn desires and cravings (rather than nutritional needs) into profits. Explanatory messages focusing on this and related points may have the potential to give lay people a new and more concrete perspective on our "food environment."

Fitness as a public good

Another critical idea from the expert perspective, but almost entirely missing from the public's thinking, is that we all have a stake in the collective fitness of our community or society. Explanations or analogies that help people recognize "public fitness" as something like a resource or quality that we collectively depend on should help make the idea of policy intervention clearer – both in terms of *why* we intervene and *how*.

* * * *

We next turn to a discussion of how the research for this project was conducted.

RESEARCH METHOD

The analysis presented in this report is based on 20 in-depth interviews conducted for the FrameWorks Institute in August and September 2006 with Americans in Colorado and Illinois.

Elicitations

Subjects participated in recorded one-on-one, semi-structured interviews ("cognitive elicitations"), conducted according to methods adapted from psychological anthropology. The goal of this methodology is to approximate a natural conversation, while also encouraging the subject to reason about a topic from a wide variety of perspectives, including some that are unexpected and deliberately challenging. Each of the encounters was recorded and transcribed for later analysis. All participants were assured that their comments would be anonymous, so no identifying information is offered in the report.

Cognitive Analysis

This type of data-gathering – and the analysis of transcripts, based on techniques of cognitive anthropology and linguistics – yields insights not available from standard interview, polling, or focus group techniques. It does not look for statements of opinion, but for patterns of thought that are often unconscious. It does not look for familiarity with issues in the news, but for more established and long-standing, default reasoning patterns. Some of the clues to these important patterns come from topics that are *omitted*, moments of *inconsistency* where one understanding clashes with another, and the *metaphors* people use to talk about a subject. Furthermore, the method is designed to explore the differences between *rhetorical mode* – in which people define themselves in opposition to other groups and perspectives, and repeat ideas and phrases familiar from public discourse – and *reasonable mode* – in which they reflect their own experiences, think for themselves, and are more open to new information. Put briefly, this analysis focuses on *how* people think rather than *what* they think.

Cognitive research of this kind works on the premise that unconscious, default understandings of the world can guide people's understanding of an issue in ways they do not even recognize. One of the most important aspects of these default understandings is that they often guide people's reasoning in ways they might reject at other moments of more careful reflection. For example, average Americans recognize on an intellectual level that the quality of a child's community has an important impact on outcomes for that child, yet habitual ways of thinking about childhood center almost exclusively on the interactions between parents and children. These habits create cognitive "blind spots." People who *know better on some level*, are nevertheless easily derailed from thinking about the other factors in childhood, because of well established, default understandings of the world. These hidden, underlying understandings can be very difficult to challenge and displace, and, if they are not accounted for, they can derail communications.

Subjects

Subjects were recruited by the researchers in two locations: Fort Collins, Colorado and Chicago, Illinois. These particular sites were chosen in order to draw both from a place with statistically high rates of good fitness (Colorado) as well as a site with low levels of fitness (Illinois). Although this research looks at cognitive models that are broadly shared by the American public, the sample was chosen to include a range of ages, ethnicities, and educational backgrounds. Of the 7 men and 13 women, 8 had college degrees, 5 had some college, 2 had only high school diplomas, and 4 had some post-graduate study. Four of the subjects were in their 20's, three in their 30's, and thirteen were age 40 or above. 16 were White, 2 African American and 1 Hispanic.

PREVIOUS FINDINGS

In this section, we briefly review some of the key findings from two previous FrameWorks projects with special relevance to the current work. The first involved research on Californians' understandings related to the connection between Health and Community, and the second focuses on Americans' understandings of food systems.

The current round of research builds substantially on these earlier findings.

Healthy Communities

We begin with findings from this FrameWorks research, supported by The California Endowment, which was particularly germane to the current topic.

Health Individualism as the Dominant Model

Californians' thinking about health is usually guided (and constrained) by a pattern that can be called "Health Individualism." According to this powerful default model, it is an individual's *personal responsibility* to make healthy or unhealthy choices, and the impacts affect the *individual*. Both the external *causes* of health and the broader *implications* of people's health are excluded from this dominant mental picture of the world.

The Causes of Health are Individual.

According to the Health Individualism view, health is determined almost entirely by individual choices and behaviors – particularly as related to eating and exercise and, to a lesser degree, stress management.

In turn, people's choices are guided mainly by three factors, none of them systemic in nature.

- Knowledge about what constitutes healthy and unhealthy living.
- Character, including personal strength and discipline, values, priorities, and so forth.
- Culture, including shared ideas (within a particular group or the population as a whole) about what's fashionable, what's acceptable, what's normal, etc.

Excluded from this default view is an entire range of "environmental" factors that experts realize are relevant to health outcomes – from availability of healthy food choices to access to healthcare to environmental toxicity to contagious disease!

An important consequence is that, as Californians think about "health," the only kinds of public interventions that seem to make sense are those related to *education*, broadly speaking – i.e., messages that lead people to make different (individual) choices, particularly about diet and exercise.

The Implications of Health are Individual.

When their thinking is guided by the dominant model, people see health outcomes as a matter *almost exclusively of concern to individuals and their loved ones*. The Health Individualism model is so powerful that people are almost entirely blind to the ways that the general population's state of health is important to every one of us.

The concept of Public Health is largely missing from Californians' conceptual repertoires – except in very limited senses, such as preventing outbreaks of infectious disease.

"Recessive" Understandings

Californians are, of course, able to think about health in other ways, and to consider other causal factors and implications. But generally speaking, these mental patterns are much weaker than Health Individualism, meaning that lay people find it more difficult and less natural to focus on them or articulate them. In other words, people sometimes think about health in terms of larger contexts and forces – but this is much less common, and people easily default back to the Health Individualism model. Some of these "recessive" understandings include:

- Modern life is unhealthy.
- Stress hurts your health.
- Toxins around us can make us sick.
- Our health is influenced by the opportunities we have to exercise and relax.
- There are strong commercial forces leading to bad health (e.g. advertising that causes us to choose unhealthy foods; stores' choices about what foods to stock).
- Mental Health is influenced by our environment, surroundings.
- Poverty leads to bad health.
- Violence in the environment is a health risk.
- Healthy people are more active and productive, and less of a burden on society.
- Healthy people around us improve our collective quality of life.
- Healthy people around us serve as good "role models" for the rest of us.

The idea of "Community" is not an effective tool for evoking bigger-picture thinking about Health.

This term/concept is primarily associated with social connections between people – and is not strongly associated with infrastructure, the availability of healthy food or opportunities for exercise in a particular area, or other external factors that can influence health.

Key missing ideas

The California elicitations established that there are two broad areas where ideas that are critical from an expert perspective are (effectively) missing from the public's thinking:

- Causal Factors: An "Ecological" model of health

  The following understanding of health is one of the most important ideas that advocates could promote: Health is affected by various aspects of our physical, social, economic and cultural *environment* – individual health is largely a product of the *systems* (natural, social, infrastructure, etc.) that surround us.

- Impacts: Health as an important Common Good

  At the "other end" of the question, advocates face an important challenge in conveying the broader *implications* of individual health outcomes. The public's reasoning would be more productive if they were able to think of health (or "public health") as:

  - Something we all have a stake in
  - Something that's collective in nature – an aggregate of everyone's health
  - Something we need to manage practically and responsibly

Food Systems

It is worth briefly reviewing several key findings of this qualitative research (conducted for the FrameWorks Institute on behalf of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation) as well, since it bears on Americans' understandings of our food supply.

A Table-centric view

Not surprisingly, Americans are much more able and inclined to think about *food* than about *food systems*.

The cultural and cognitive domain of food – which centers on the lived, everyday experience of eating, cooking, shopping – is as rich as any area of our lives.

For basic cognitive reasons, it is much *easier* to think about this level of experience than about the systems that create the food supply – people are simply better equipped to think about and focus on concrete objects, human-scale rather than systems-scale ideas, etc.

For emotional reasons, it is also much more *motivating* to think of food in terms of nurturance and comfort than to focus on sometimes ugly realities of where food comes from.

There are no common cultural understandings of where the food supply comes from, except for faint echoes of romantic farm imagery, or a vague and exaggerated sense that

food is now produced in "factories" (a sense that matches with broader understandings of the "Generic Modernization" of contemporary life).

No problem

In current American society, as opposed to other places and times, the food supply is not a problem people are concerned about, generally speaking. Our food is, by default, regarded as safe, plentiful and reasonably healthy. There are a number of historical and contextual reasons for this pattern, but the bottom line is that since the food supply presents no obvious problems, it is simply not a topic that Americans spend time thinking about. (Following particular food scares, overall complacency quickly resumes.)

Consumers in charge

One of the unfortunate patterns observed in the food systems research, with special relevance to the current project, is average Americans' default view that the foods offered by the food industry are the ones that consumers want.

There is very little awareness of the "players" involved in making decisions about the food supply, or the forces at work in shaping it.

FITNESS AND SAVINGS ACCOUNTS – THE PERSONAL IDEAL FRAME

The central finding of this round of research, which echoes and builds on previous research on thinking about health (and, to a lesser extent, food systems), is that, on a "good day," Fitness is conceived of primarily as what we call a Personal Ideal – and that it is hard for Americans to conceive of it in any other positive way. (Of course, a certain percentage of people simply dismiss the topic as relatively unimportant, something like a particular hobby that interests only certain people.)

In many respects, Americans think about staying or getting "fit" in the same way they think about *depositing some money in their savings account every month*. For most people it's more a personal ideal than a successful practice. This comparison helps clarify the structure of Fitness in Americans' thinking, and we refer to it throughout this section.

The most important consequences of the Personal Ideal frame for Fitness concern ideas that are *excluded* by the frame. The more this pattern of thinking guides our reasoning, the harder it is to think about many topics that are critical from a policy and advocacy perspective.

Nature of the frame

We begin by giving a picture of the conception of Fitness as a Personal Ideal.

Fitness is important (in principle).

As with putting money away on a regular basis, most people recognize that fitness is important in principle. In both cases, the stakes – financial and physical wellbeing – are understood to be high.

> *Q: Can you tell me what fitness means to you?*
>
> *A: Well, fitness has always been everything to me, being career military, and being educated at West Point, where physical fitness is an integral part of leadership. So I've always put a high value on it.*
>
> White man, age 68, Fort Collins

It is recognized as a societal value.

As with financial savings, Fitness is a topic people expect to encounter in public discourse, in conversations with friends and strangers and in the news (and particularly, "news you can use") – Americans know that it is a personal goal many others are interested in, and that people may even be judged on.

> *Q: These days in our society, do you see too much emphasis on fitness, or not enough, or maybe an OK amount?*

A: In some perspectives, I think that there's too much and, in some perspectives, I think there's not enough. Because I think there's like "over-exercisers," that they're obsessed with it, and I think that, unfortunately, the media and marketing have put a body image issue especially on women. In college, I knew women who would work out two or three times a day, which is a little excessive. So, in that perspective, I think the media puts pressures on women, that they need to be skinny and perfectly built.

White woman, age 29, Fort Collins

Q: Who's telling us we need to get fit and why would we be concerned? Where are we getting these ideas from?

A: I think the government, the surgeon general. The president. You see a lot of – I don't know if I'd call it fitness, but – a lot of attention being given to appearance by a celebrity-oriented society. So I think we get messages there about our appearance.

Hispanic woman, age 55, Chicago

Everyone knows it's hard and no fun.

Again, like the act of putting away money, part of the public conception of Fitness is that it is hard to achieve. Saving money involves obvious sacrifices and difficulties – likewise, subjects refer over and over to the idea that getting or staying fit involves sacrifice and unpleasantness. It is obviously no fun to give up foods we like, and exercising is widely perceived as a difficult and strenuous activity.

Mental resolve is the first step. I think you have to decide you want to be fit. Then you plan. You prepare to be fit. You organize your day so you allow yourself the opportunity to be fit.

Hispanic woman, age 55, Chicago

I wish I had that kind of determination, you know? I had it to a certain extent for a while, but lately I haven't.

African-American man, age 50, Chicago

This difficulty comes partly from the sacrifices involved (e.g. giving up foods) and partly from the *time commitment* involved (e.g. for exercising, cooking and shopping for healthier foods, etc.). Subjects often mention the ubiquity of fast food restaurants and the size of portions as one of the reasons Americans aren't as fit as they should be. But rather than seeing this condition as something we can actively work to change, people are likely

to interpret the conditions as a "given" that requires us to either exercise personal discipline, or not.

> *It's definitely not easy to be healthy. It's so much easier not to be. You're surrounded by more junk food than you are healthy food. You have to seek out healthy food.*
>
> White man, age 29, Chicago

In the end, people often accept that they and others might not actually achieve the Personal Ideal of fitness. That is, while people expect to be judged on their fitness, as on their ability to save money, there is also the expectation of a certain amount of slack.

There was surprisingly little sense in the elicitations of fitness as seamlessly and painlessly integrated into a normal or average life.

Despite its importance, it remains a relatively low priority in practice.

While people recognize the importance of fitness on an intellectual level, they also acknowledge that many people (often including themselves) do not actually follow through on this knowledge. We all know people who are great savers and people who are great at staying "in shape." But this description doesn't necessarily fit "the rest of us."

> *[The people who are fit] make the time to go to the gym or educate themselves in terms of the food they're eating and the things they're putting into their body more than I do. They've made it a priority. Certainly I could be healthy and be in shape, but I would have to make that happen.*
>
> White woman, age 30, Chicago

Q: What does fitness mean to you?

A: Doing my sit-ups every morning. That's about it, really. I don't go to the gym as much as I used to. So fitness, I don't know … I don't partake.

Asian man, age 52, Chicago

Closely related to this point, the activities associated with fitness are easily seen as *peripheral* relative to our day-to-day lives.

Q: What can a city do to improve the overall health and fitness of people who live there?

A: It's interesting in Chicago, the parks and rec department down at Millennium Park, they have yoga and pilates and different exercise classes in the park every weekend.

White woman, age 53, Chicago

Until and unless there is a major cultural change in the U.S., activities like yoga and pilates will continue to be seen as niche activities enjoyed by a particular segment of the population.

Individual choices are visible; systemic factors are not.

Ultimately, Americans' thinking about fitness, like their thinking about personal savings, revolves around individual choices and individual discipline. While people may recognize that some external factors are relevant, these can really be dismissed as not the "real" issues.

Q: If gyms were cheaper do you think more people would go to them?

A: [laughs] No. Maybe if they handed out money. I just think they're lazy. Either you want to do it or you don't. Either you do it if you want to be healthy or do it because your doctor told you to otherwise you're going to have another heart attack. Or you're lazy. I think it's just those three things.

White man, age 29, Chicago

From the Personal Ideal perspective, other people's choices and actions – including actions by governments, industries, communities – are basically invisible and irrelevant.

The government's role? Encouraging people to eat better, I suppose, to be fit, but they're already doing that. I mean it's up to an individual what they want to do. I don't think they can force people to do something.

White woman, age 62, Fort Collins

On a closely related note, thinking about fitness follows a pattern observed on many other issues, where "Mental" factors seem relevant and "Material" factors aren't noticed. That is, achieving fitness, like financial savings, ultimately boils down to *mental* factors (which are understood as being individual in nature) like discipline, knowledge, choices, priorities, strength of character and culture. *Material* factors (which tend to be more collective and systemic in nature) are usually excluded from people's thinking: patterns of food industry production and distribution, location of food sources (e.g. grocery stores, fast-food restaurants, etc.), transportation services and patterns (e.g. opportunities to walk from place to place), etc.

Q: How would one go about becoming fit?

A: Well, first of all they have to have a belief in themselves. I think a lot of the reason that people aren't fit today is simply a lack of spirituality.

White man, age 68, Fort Collins

Q: Why is it that we're not, as a society or as individuals, doing all that we need to do to stay fit and healthy?

A: You know, this is going to sound a little bit facetious, but drive-thrus. I mean, People Magazine, is a perfect example. People Magazine is for people who don't want to read, who have an attention span of 60 seconds or shorter, who don't really want information, who just want captions. Well, our lifestyle has become the same way. We want captions, we want quick food. We want easy things.

White man, age 50, Fort Collins

And, as this quote illustrates, a "mentalist" perspective makes it difficult to see any sensible ways government might promote fitness.

I'm not saying they should make it a law that you have to eat healthy, but make suggestions. Put out little things, you know, pamphlets or something from the government saying that you should do this or do that to stay healthy.

African-American man, age 50, Chicago

A corollary of the "mentalist" perspective is that what comes to mind as effective interventions are education – i.e., improving people's minds, rather than changing their circumstances.

Implications are individual, not collective.

If the *causes* related to fitness are individual in nature – i.e. individual choices and behaviors – then the *implications* are understood in a way that is at least as limited and limiting. As with financial savings, people are able to see the consequences for the individual, but much less likely to focus on the (very real) consequences for others, and for the broader community.

The bottom line is everyone's their own person. If you're fat and you have trouble even walking down the street, then go to it. I don't give a damn. If you don't want to take care of yourself, then don't. People shouldn't be babied. They should have a mind of their own.

White man, age 29, Chicago

The woman below, despite being well-educated and articulate, could not help immediately slipping into individual terms:

Q: What benefits does the state get if its citizens are [more fit]?

A: More productivity from people, a happier person, more spiritually balanced.

White woman, age 60, Fort Collins

Communities and governments aren't seen as having much of a role in promoting fitness and, from the Personal Ideal perspective, it's not at all clear why they would: they seemingly have nothing at stake.

Q: We have become a flabby nation, [shouldn't we] be concerned about that?

A: I don't think we should be concerned about it. If a person's going to stuff his gut and die early, then let him do it. That's their problem . . . Is the government going to come in and start dictating to people how they can be happy and how they can improve their quality [of life]?

White man, age 68, Fort Collins

In the preceding quote, the impact of fitness is clearly on (individual) happiness.

Q: Why is it that the government's concerned about this issue at all?

A: I don't know. I guess the Department of .. I guess they don't have anything else to do but study on that. I don't know. I guess somebody's paid, a government official, to study these things ...

White man, age 50, Chicago

We are ambivalent about "new information."

While there is a desire for new information about getting and staying fit – as there is about ways of putting away savings – there is also fatigue and resentment associated with hearing these "helpful" reminders.

I'm getting skeptical about all these so-called studies. Who the hell knows where they're coming from, who's behind it? Who paid for it? It's hard for me to believe everything I hear. It's hard for me to decide what to believe.

Hispanic woman, age 55, Chicago

When the man below is asked about the benefits of a healthier population, he answers that the main benefits would be lower health care costs and that we wouldn't have to hear about the topics anymore.

Q: Would [the state of Illinois] be better off if people were more physically fit?

A: Oh, I think every state would be. If everyone were healthier . . . we wouldn't have all the bad publicity around McDonalds or around [the] studies that people do. It would just be an easier place to live and not have to hear that in the background.

White man, age 26, Chicago

There are some extreme cases of "failure."

Just as people are aware that there are many people who don't save enough money and end up in poverty, they are aware that a certain segment of the population is severely unfit – in both cases, the natural tendency is for people to assume that the responsibility for the outcome lies with the individual.

In particular, the issue of obesity deserves more extended attention here, because it is often in the news, and seems as though it might provide an opportunity for a more informed public discussion of fitness.

Obesity as a personal issue

The issue often is taken seriously, as the beginning of the following quote illustrates:

> *I think [obesity] should be treated like a disease. I think that it affects your entire body, it also affects your mind. ... It's a very holistic issue, you know, in terms of your body, and disease is similar as well, in terms of that it usually affects your whole body in some capacity or another. And I also think it should be treated like a disease because you can die from it, and I think that might be the only way to get Americans to actually pay any attention to it.*
>
> White woman, age 36, Fort Collins

As the later portion of the quote makes clear, the problem, from this subject's perspective, has to do with Americans' failure to pay attention to the problem in their personal lives.

The same combination of seriousness and personal responsibility is again reflected in the following quote from a different subject:

> *You know, I saw something recently about America's youth being obese and Americans being obese, but who pays attention? Nobody pays attention to it. They just keep right on eating.*
>
> African-American man, age 50, Chicago

Even the very sympathetic woman below, who wishes more people could be healthy, sees the issue in terms of the little actions people should take in their own lives to avoid obesity.

> *Now, granted, there are some people who are genetically tuned to be obese, but I see so many people that if they would just start walking around the block one time a day ...*
>
> White woman, early 60s, Fort Collins

As with many of our subjects' comments, a distinctly moral tone is apparent in this informant's statement.

In short, the issue of obesity currently does not act as an "eye-opening" issue that helps people look at a bigger picture. Instead, it fits well within the personal perspective on fitness, including the idea that the causes, solutions and impacts related to obesity are all individual in nature. Like fitness and personal savings, obesity ultimately boils down to a matter of personal priorities for Americans.

> *Q: Does it make sense to think of obesity as a sickness in itself? In terms of stressing your body or making it harder to walk ...?*
>
> *A: No. No, I think obesity is a state of mind. People can be obese and be happy with themselves and not care if a person says, "Oh, you're fat."*
>
> Asian man, age 52, Chicago

* * * * *

In sum, the Personal Ideal frame, though not the only mode people have for thinking about fitness, is clearly the dominant one. It provides a clear, coherent and *self-sufficient* mode for thinking about Fitness. It tells average Americans what to focus on and what they *don't* need to focus on; explains how the issue relates to values and identity; and clarifies who the relevant "players" are – i.e. each and every one of us *as an individual*. Critically, this frame locates the issue of Fitness within the larger domain of *moral tests and choices* we all face in our personal lives.

Just as importantly, the frame guides Americans away from thinking about many other important topics. The Personal Ideal perspective makes it much harder to focus on the role of government in promoting fitness, the ways in which opportunities for fitness are shaped by powerful industries, and so forth – *and even individuals who are educated and otherwise aware of the world around them regularly default to the pattern*.

The frame is created and reinforced by everything from basic cognitive tendencies to American values to news stories about healthy diet and motivational messages from TV

exercise gurus. *Unless it is effectively countered, the frame can be expected to grow stronger over time rather than weaker.*

We next discuss a key obstacle to moving the American public past the Personal Ideal frame.

The Stubbornness of the Problem

The elicitations made it clear not only that the Personal Ideal model is a powerful default for thinking about Fitness and food – even if people know better on some intellectual level – *but also that it is extremely hard to shift people from this pattern of thinking*.

There is no denying that personal choices about food etc. are a key factor in determining an individual's health and fitness. But an important question for researchers and communicators is why the other valid causal factors and implications of fitness are so much harder to think about, even for smart, educated and concerned individuals.

One of the chief reasons for the stubbornness of this frame appears to be that the Personal Ideal understanding is such an excellent fit with everyday understandings. The answer to the fitness problem is as simple as can be, as the following exchange illustrates:

> *Q: Can anyone become fit? How do you go about becoming fit?*
>
> *A: Go to the gym.*
>
> Asian man, age 52, Chicago

The stubbornness of the default understanding has several dimensions, which we discuss next.

Cognitive predispositions

From a cognitive science perspective, it is clear that certain ideas are easier and more natural for people to focus on than others: concrete objects that are at human scale (spoons, houses, cars as opposed to governments, atoms, continents); time scales of minutes, hours or weeks rather than microseconds or millennia; social relations between individual people; actions that an individual person can take; and so forth.

This natural mode of thinking can be summed up as the tendency to understand the world in terms of "Everyday Action Scenarios" – of which the domains of eating and exercise are perfect illustrations. That is, regardless of differences in experience or education, it will always be easier for people to think about individual food and activity choices than about how industries or societies are organized. This represents a general problem for advocates on a wide variety of issues, *but especially for advocates in any area related to such basic topics as food and the body*.

From an "everyday action scenario" perspective, it is simply indisputable that people are determining their health and fitness through their own choices. Even if this limited picture is an illusion in a certain sense, it is one that is very hard to displace.

American values

Patterns of everyday thinking make it hard to even *see* factors beyond individual choice when it comes to the topic area of fitness. This cognitive problem is made worse by Individualism as a hallmark of American culture. As many of the quotes in the previous discussion illustrate, Americans put a strong emphasis on *individual responsibility as a moral value*. That is, even when they are able to recognize external factors that might be contributing to the fitness problem, Americans preferentially focus on the ways in which individual choices are to blame, and individual actions are the solution.

Any explanation that draws attention to systemic factors is quickly perceived as *dismissing* individual responsibility. Thus, for example, an explanation that puts blame on our available food choices or our car-dominated landscape is likely to be interpreted as simply "making excuses" for people who are trying to evade their own responsibility.

Advertising

Just as virtually the entire world of commercial advertising urges us to spend, rather than to save, there is a constant and powerful flow of commercial messages implicitly urging us to ignore the diet and exercise "scolds," "reward ourselves" etc. And even ads that are "pro fitness" – e.g. for "healthy" cereals – end up promoting the little-picture understanding that fitness is *all and exclusively* about personal choices. By definition, consumer behavior is individual in nature, and advertising in whatever direction is bound to promote little-picture thinking.

Importantly, advertising was almost never mentioned by the elicitations subjects, even though advertising represents an obvious problem from the perspective of experts and advocates. This aspect of the problem is almost invisible to average Americans.

Emotional weight

As quotes in the previous discussion illustrate, issues related to food, the body and physical activity are deeply tied to various fundamental feelings about our lives – guilt, desire, hope, shame, etc. The emotional significance of the topic is another factor tying it to our personal, everyday, little-picture thinking about the world.

* * * * * *

While the challenges outlined in this section are obviously daunting, there were also indications in the elicitations of some promising directions to pursue in the next round of research. In the next section we discuss hypotheses about ways of moving the public conversation beyond the Personal Ideal impasse.

TOWARDS A SIMPLIFYING MODEL

The elicitations project reported on here was conceived partly as preparation for a subsequent project to develop explanations that can quickly help average Americans think more productively about food and fitness – particularly, to think in bigger-picture terms about systemic causes related to fitness, and policy interventions that might help improve fitness.

It is important to point out that one of the key parts of any simplifying models project on a major topic like fitness is to figure out *what to try to explain*. There are many, many ideas related to fitness that it might be helpful if average people understood better – from what a calorie is, to the effects of food processing, to the relationship between urban planning and physical activity, to ideas about evolutionary biology, or the role of advertising. One of the key tasks in the development of explanatory messages is identifying which of these are worth focusing attention on – because they seem to be key missing ideas in the public's conceptual repertoire, because there seems to be good potential for explaining them in a clear way, because understanding them will make other important ideas clearer, and so forth.

In this section, we review a number of hypotheses about explanatory directions that emerged from or were inspired by the elicitations.

Work and Fitness

One major exception to Americans' relative "blindness" to systemic dimensions of the fitness topic is their understanding of the changing nature of *work*. There is broad awareness of the idea that work has become more sedentary than it used to be, and that our work lives are less conducive to fitness in other ways – e.g. because we are more likely to drive there or to work from a desk at home; or because we are "too busy" to cook or eat anything but fast food.

Given the number of hours that working and commuting occupy in our waking life, it seems reasonable to say that changes in work mean changes in life. Explanations about the changing nature of work might help organize many other ideas about how our physical experience is different (and in some important respects less healthy) than it once was.

Currently, understandings of the changing nature of work offer people little sense that we can *actively bring about change for the better* – work "is what it is," as a consequence of modern life. On the other hand, the elicitations did suggest a possible opening for a productive explanatory approach: Many elicitations subjects were willing to say that employers have a stake in their employees' health; fit workers are happier, more productive, and less expensive.

> *It's fairly obvious that most workers have a rather sedate workplace where they just are not able to get out and work out or even just get outside and walk around the block, and I think it's important that the employers take note of that and provide time, paid time, for such kinds of physical activities.*

White woman, age 60, Fort Collins

I don't know how you slow down … shorten the workday by an hour, and give people an hour to focus on eating right or exercising?

White woman, age 62, Fort Collins

A builder in town here 30 years ago put a racquetball court in his headquarters, and he promoted that amongst his employees. And I think productivity could be increased immensely by employers just providing space, providing time, having the attitude that, yeah, instead of taking a coffee break, let's go out and play volleyball or something like that for 10 or 15 minutes, or 20 minutes . . .

White man, age 68, Fort Collins

This pattern suggests that it may be productive to explore explanations of how workplaces – and by extension communities – have a practical interest in creating the conditions for fitness. Americans already recognize that workplaces have a practical *capacity* to influence health and fitness (e.g. by providing exercise space and equipment, subsidies for health clubs, better food options, more time to eat, etc.).

Importantly, promoting the connection between productivity and fitness might involve establishing a connection between Mind and Body – for example, by drawing attention to how exercising helps people relax, which in turn makes them better able to get along with others, focus better, and be more creative, and so forth.

An Ecological View

Among the most general points an explanatory message might address is the fact that our environment, in a broad sense, affects our health and fitness. This environment includes everything from how work life is organized to the kinds of food-related businesses around us to opportunities for walking and other public exercise, and so forth. On this level, environments are very different in the degree to which they promote health and fitness, and might even be *rated* on this in a concrete way. Terms like *public health conditions* or *fitness conditions* may help make this concept more solid, and there are a number of other ways the general ecological perspective might be expressed, e.g.

- Environments can be *engineered* to promote fitness (or not).
- The *deck* (i.e. our environment) is currently *stacked* against fitness, but can be altered.
- Our current environment *pushes us in particular directions* – e.g. away from healthy foods and activities – but can be changed.

The ecological view might also focus on the *fit* between our environment and our biology – e.g. the fact that we crave salt, sugars and fat for particular evolutionary reasons, and that living in an environment that offers these too abundantly is in itself unhealthy.

There may also be other, creative ways of conveying the ecological point – e.g. by using the analogies of weather or terrain: Most people believe that people are more likely to exercise in warm, sunny climates and in places that offer possibilities for hiking, skiing, etc. In this sense, our current "fitness environment" is like a cold climate or difficult terrain that makes us much less likely to get fit – except that *we can potentially manipulate these conditions in our favor*.

Understanding the Food Industry

One of the very fundamental missing understandings about the food industry is that it's adapted to a specific purpose: profiting from our desires and cravings. It did not evolve as a mechanism for providing what's good for us. From this perspective, *nearly everything about the offerings at a restaurant or supermarket should be suspect*. While Americans are not likely to achieve an extreme version of this perspective, they may be open to a more modest "aha moment."

To return to the Savings Account analogy, people may not be too upset over their own failure to save money, but are likely to react poorly if they believe someone is *preventing them from saving* by manipulating or cheating them. Likewise, an explanation of how the food industry makes it much less likely that a person can achieve fitness may potentially be an eye opener.

Fitness as a Public Good

Finally, as previous sections of the report have discussed, another central point typically lost on average Americans is the extent to which we have a stake in each other's fitness. Fitness is an important public good, and there are significant costs to society if we don't protect and promote it – just as there are costs to businesses whose employees aren't fit and healthy.

This point might be expressed in relatively literal, concrete, bottom-line terms, or might be conveyed through more creative analogies, for instance: "Public Fitness" is like a resource that society has more or less of; fitness is like the strength of a (national) structure; fitness levels are like educational levels that determine what a population is capable of.

* * * * * *

Each of these hypothetical directions needs to be explored, refined and tested empirically, but in principle, it is explanatory strategies like these that have the capacity to bring about fundamental shifts in Americans' thinking about fitness.

CONCLUSION

The elicitations on food and fitness revealed an interesting contradiction that reflects Americans' confused and deeply conflicted thinking about the topic. Elicitations subjects told us that Americans are unfit because:

A. We are too *busy and hardworking* to consistently exercise or watch our diet.

B. We are too *lazy* to consistently exercise or watch our diet.

One subject summarized the point concisely:

Q: Why are so many people unfit these days?

A: Laziness. Or being too busy.

White woman, age 62, Fort Collins

Americans are confident that we are not as fit as we should be, but fundamentally unclear about why this is so. While advocates have done a successful job in recent years of persuading the public that fitness is important, there is clearly work to be done in helping them sort out what this fact means for our society.

***About FrameWorks Institute*:** The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute's work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

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