

BRIEF

Frames That Inform Intergenerational Work

Abstract

Aspects of research-based framing relative to populations and services (children, youth, older adults, human services) can inform how the intergenerational field presents its work. There are common threads: life cycle, (human) development, and redefinition. There are common challenges: placing blame with the individual or family; lack of societal responsibility; and othering – using terminology to refer to people in terms that set them apart from the mainstream. There is a metaphor – building wellbeing – from the human services frame that has relevance for intergenerational approaches and the populations they encompass. These and other elements from the framing research can be applied to increase understanding of intergenerational strategies.

Purpose of This Brief

The intergenerational field is one with roots in other fields; the fields of children and youth, families, aging/older adults, and human services, among them. Put another way, many of the people working to advance intergenerational cooperation and interdependence hail from other specialized fields.

The intent of this brief is to increase awareness of the fact that people come at intergenerational issues from different vantage points and “frames” and to point out areas of commonality relative to perceptions and framing of these fields that can and should influence how we make the case for intergenerational programs, policies and planning.

Framing Not Wild Guessing

In this context, we are referring to the disciplined framing of an issue, concept or field based in social science research. George Lakoff, former Distinguished Professor of Cognitive Science and Linguistics at the University of California-Berkeley, is known for bringing the notion of research-based framing to the fore. The Frameworks Institute (FWI), a MacArthur Award-winning nonprofit based in Washington D.C. – perhaps the best-known research and consulting firm focused primarily on framing – has applied the discipline of framing to increasing understanding of diverse issues, from global warming to early brain development.



Framing rooted in social science research is distinct from the more colloquial use of the term to achieve marketing or political aims. The former entails rigorous research methods to reveal objective, deeply-rooted public understandings; the latter uses limited or no research (and, if so, often snapshot polls) and is done *to influence public understanding in a certain way and at a given point in time*. Again, the term, framing, is used in the present brief in a singular way – as an objective process rooted in social science research and methods.

Frames That Can Inform Us

Important framing research has been done in recent years on a variety of topics relevant to the intergenerational field. Generations United examined framing documents on early child development, aging, child and youth development, human services, and one on generations and demographic change. Again, Frameworks Institute is unique in its multidisciplinary approach (heavily rooted in research) to framing on these subjects. As such, all the framing documents reviewed for this brief were produced by FWI.

Here are the framing materials considered for the present brief:

- [Framing Early Childhood Development](#)
- [Framing Child & Youth Development](#)
- [Building a New Narrative on Human Services](#)
- [Framing Strategies to Advance Aging and Address Ageism as Policy Issues](#)

Each frame stands on its own; and we commend you to the original work (by FWI; also to National Human Services Assembly and its [National Reframing Human Services Initiative](#)) to get a full understanding of each frame and the research that led to it. This brief is intended to help the reader – an intergenerational thinker or practitioner – appreciate and employ a few key elements that cut across two or more of the frames.

Frames Similar But Different

There are issues very specific to the individual subject matter of the population-centered and human services frames – ageism relative to older adults, how the brain develops for children, placing total responsibility for adolescent behavior (or misbehavior) solely on parents, a lack of understanding of the value of human services to the community, to cite but one example from each of the four frames referenced here. Based on its research, Frameworks Institute provides communication strategies for navigating around these and other issues affecting public understanding of early child development, school-age and adolescent development, aging, and human services.

What do the four frames have in common, other than methodology? That is what we intend to address here. There is no frame-of-frames at this point and how could there be? There are unlimited issues that FWI has been active in (e.g., environment, education, immigration) that could be a part of a frame to address the whole of the human condition and how we live together. Short of such a frame-of-frames, one that included intergenerational connections, what do the four frames on which we are focused have in common...that is relevant to those engaged in intergenerational community-building?

Common Threads

To begin with, three of the four frames are about age-cohorts, each affected by issues and developmental needs during the life cycle. Parents and guardians of children and youth and adult children of older adults are integral to and active in the lives of both young and old, often concurrently. Thus, *life cycle* is an important element in addressing the needs and issues affecting vast swaths of the population. Yet, as a society and relative to human needs and human services, we tend to think and talk about and address issues by population cohort as siloed.

The frames for children and youth speak to children and *development* (including, notably, brain development in the early years and physical, social and emotional development along the way). We tend not to think of older adults in such terms but consider how the brain is changing as one ages and the “developmental stages” that most older adults now experience. And much of what we refer to under the umbrella of human services are services which support people as they develop at whatever age. Indeed, the child and youth development frame speaks of development as an *active* process. As those in any aspect of human services and human development can attest: developing is an active process...for both young and old.

The frame for aging cites a need to redefine aging in terms that the public can understand. Redefinition of a societal function that few understand was the impetus for the reframing human services. The frames for young children and child and youth development come at the issue a bit more indirectly suggesting, for example, that children are not empty vessels to be filled but creatures whose brains and bodies are developing, ideally in a supportive community environment, to become what they will become. In a significant sense, all four frames include *redefinition*, or perhaps more aptly, *developing in people a better understanding of the stages in life, based on solid research*.



Common Challenges

The framing research identifies ways in which people of a given culture (in this case, the U.S.) have of thinking about the subjects of the four frames that are uninformed or poorly informed, inaccurate and, well, stuck. We develop these misconceptions (aka, “defaults”) at a young age and they become almost hard-wired in our brains. There are a few common misconceptions that exist among several of our framing subjects:

- **Placing blame with the individual or the parents/family.** For example, a youth gone astray is the fault of bad parenting or is just a bad kid; an individual affected by drug abuse is weak. We separate ourselves from the individual and the problem when we place blame. More significantly, placing blame does nothing to solve the problem or address the need; there will still be costs, including costs to the community.
- **Lack of societal responsibility.** Because the public generally blames the individual for her problems, it locates the solution for the problem with the individual not the broader community or government. Such thinking makes it difficult to build support for public policies and programs designed to create systemic change.
- **Othering, considering specific populations to be other than “us.”** When we speak about the elderly, immigrants, delinquent youth, the poor, etc., we put them in a category other than ourselves or the mainstream. As a result, the conditions that affect them are owned by them not us, us being society at large. Such thinking disregards such realities as, that at some point, everyone becomes old, we may be or may have been an immigrant or poor, and that troubled youth affect all of us.

Common Values

The framing research recommends leading in communications with community/cultural values that “inoculate” against the public’s misperceptions and biases about people who need help. Again, one should refer to the specific framing subject matter documents as to what value(s) to cite in communicating about each of the different framing subjects. That said, some values are cited for more than one frame. To the extent that the population age cohorts and human services are interrelated, these following values, which the research identifies for one or more of the framing subjects, may play a role in helping people understand the different generations and the community supports that exist for them.

- **Reciprocity:** applied to young people in the framing research, as in, ‘if we support young people now, they will become assets to the community as adults.’ Not cited in the framing research but it would be logical to extrapolate that the same can apply to older adults: if we support them, they will be contributing members of the community and have need for fewer resources from the community.
- **Fairness Across Places:** This is cited in relation to children and youth; it is an equity issue, as opposed to what is sometimes referred to as the zip code lottery (i.e., one’s opportunities and success in life varies depending on the economic profile of the zip code in which he/she lives.) This could apply to the well-being of older adults and the availability and quality of human services as well.
- **Human Potential:** Found to be the most productive in the human services frame, this valuing of every individual suggests that we all benefit when everyone can reach their full potential and contribute to their community in meaningful ways.

One might also consider *shared prosperity* and *humanity*, values which are cited in the [Frameworks research about immigration](#) as relevant here as well.

Metaphors

Framing experts tell us that metaphors can be instrumental in helping people understand complex issues and build knowledge, instead of the jargon commonly used in the sector and in the media. A metaphor from the human services frame (essentially, a replacement for “human services” as a descriptor in public discourse) is particularly noteworthy:

- **Social Good: Well-Being.** That’s what most in the fields of child and youth development, aging, and human services are trying to help people achieve and the framing research found that this term was more meaningful to the public than problems, services, and other ways of referring to the problem-solution cycle.
- **Metaphor: Building/Constructing Well-Being.** The framing research found, of multiple metaphors tested, construction/building was the one that could best build understanding of how human services work. This metaphor suggests that we build well-being just like a house is built, on a strong foundation, with a range of resources and expertise, and providing maintenance over time. Though identified through the human services framing process, building well-being is arguably what society seeks for children, their families, *and* older adults.

Together, with the values cited above and lifecycle examples, the “building well-being” metaphor expands the public’s understanding of why people need help, that we are all responsible for making sure that help is available, and that the community shares in this responsibility along with each of us as individuals; i.e., just as it takes many to build a building (think: barn raising), it takes a community for each of us to achieve well-being.



The Frameworks studies recommend specific metaphors relative to early brain/child development, child and youth development, and aging and we commend them to you as you focus in on these populations. What we suggest here is that Building Well-Being is a metaphor that could be helpful in describing what the intergenerational field is seeking for young and old, together.

Thinking About Intergenerational Work

If our point as practitioners and advocates of intergenerational approaches is to help society understand that it is important, no, essential, to connect young and old in positive and sustainable ways that benefit all ages and the community as a whole, we need to understand and address the needs of young, old, and those who care for them in ways that can be pursued across the generations. Part of that is using language and concepts that are used in the silos specific to these populations and related fields (NB, human services) as we make the case for intergenerational living. Among them:

- **Life cycle:** Relevant to young and old but most importantly relevant to our total experience as humans across the lifespan.
- **Development:** As Frameworks points out relative to children and youth, development is an active process (not just stages); also relevant to people as they age.
- **Blame:** Avoid it. Whatever one experiences is rarely the fault of the individual or the family alone, if at all; and placing blame does nothing to improve the situation.
- **Societal/community responsibility:** While individuals have self-determination and families are an important part of addressing needs, society has and has always had a role in helping people develop and thrive. It's important to help people understand that this is the case.
- **Othering:** Stop it. When the article "the" is used before the word we use for a group of people (e.g., the poor, the minorities), we are saying, "they are not like us" or "they are not a part of us." The same holds for terms like "senior" (unless when referring to upper-class members in education settings) and "senior citizen." It's more than being PC; using terms like older adults, people with disabilities, and children in low-resource communities includes subpopulations with the general population – them with us.

- **Reciprocity:** Use the concept: we all benefit when those around us and in our communities do well. Therefore, it is to our benefit when we as a community make it possible for all people to thrive.
- **Fairness across places:** A compelling part of the argument: people often have little or no control relative to where they live, what conditions they experience, and what lot they have in life. Good luck and resource-rich communities are not evenly distributed. Society, the community, has a role in evening out the opportunities.
- **Human potential:** Much better to cite than a litany of problems or disadvantages. Every human is valued and deserves the opportunity to achieve well-being. (Also reflects our common humanity.)
- **Well-being:** The research on framing human services indicates that people appreciate the need for all people to achieve well-being. That frame came at it from the human services sector vantage point. The populations cited here (children and youth, older adults, and, implicitly, their caregivers) are those for whom well-being is to be sought.
- **Building well-being:** A mighty metaphor and one that can so well apply to the foundation of intergenerational efforts; not only are we as a community seeking well-being for specific populations but we greatly advance their opportunities to achieve well-being by connecting the generations. Building/rebuilding those connections in diverse ways and across the lifespan helps children, youth, and older adults to fare well on their developmental journeys and strengthen the community (strengthens mutual understanding and respect) at the same time.

Many communities and many professionals and advocates take intergenerational approaches very seriously. Those who do, however, are still in the minority or an intergenerational perspective and intergenerational strategy would be an integral part of how every city, town, county and state goes about its work. Using language that helps move people beyond stereotypes and uninformed “defaults” to constructive concepts that are evidence-based and that resonate widely is not enough to take “intergenerational” to scale but it is a necessary element to achieving that purpose.



Now, Your Turn

The intergenerational field is a learning community. Please share ways in which you and/or your organization have used the concepts cited here, extrapolated from framing in related fields, to move the needle in terms of public understanding of the value and importance of intergenerational approaches.

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About Generations United

The mission of Generations United is to improve the lives of children, youth and older adults through intergenerational collaboration, public policies and programs for the enduring benefit of all. For over three decades, Generations United has catalyzed cooperation and collaboration among generations, evoking the vibrancy, energy and sheer productivity that result when people of all ages come together. We believe that we can only be successful in the face of our complex future if age diversity is regarded as a national asset and fully leveraged.

To learn more about Generations United, please visit www.gu.org.

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