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The Influence of Episodic and Thematic Frames on Policy and Group Attitudes: Mediational Analysis

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An experiment examined how episodic and thematic political message frames affect attitudes toward older adults and Social Security. When exposed to messages about abolishing Social Security, participants exposed to episodic frames were significantly more likely to endorse message-consistent attitudes than participants exposed to a thematic frame. In mediation analyses, an episodic frame featuring a counterstereotypical exemplar increased endorsement of individual responsibility for retirement planning, which then led to more negative attitudes toward Social Security. These effects did not occur with a stereotypical exemplar in an episodic frame. The same mediated pathway influenced attitudes toward older adults in a more complex manner. Results provide support for individual responsibility attributions as a mediating mechanism underlying the effects of certain episodic frames.

This study examines the intended and unintended effects of political messages on attitudes, utilizing framing theory. We aim to understand the nature of the effects and to explore some of the mechanisms by which message frames influence different types of attitudes. We compare episodic and thematic frames. Thematic frames emphasize broader trends or background information on a topic (Iyengar, 2011). Episodic frames utilize a particular individual's experience or a specific event to illustrate the issue (Iyengar, 1991). The human interest details in the episodic frame allow receivers to put a real face on the presentation of a problem (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). We believe that this exposure to a specific individual has implications for the intended persuasive intent of the message, and unintended effects on attitudes toward other similar individuals.

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The study examines the effects of anti-Social Security messages on young adults. Social Security is a U.S. government benefit program for older adults, which is primarily funded through payroll tax revenues that go into a trust fund. The trust fund is projected to be depleted by 2036, resulting in substantial challenges in funding the program (Social Security Administration, 2011). These challenges could significantly impact how young adults prepare for retirement.

We consider two broad classes of attitudinal consequences of these messages: the intended effects on attitudes about the policy, and the (presumably unintended) effects on attitudes toward older adults—the policy's prime beneficiaries. Attitudes are important because they not only potentially predict behaviors (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), but also allow us to understand how people view the world (Fazio, 1986). Over the past several decades, social, political, and demographic change in the United States has polarized public attitudes toward large government programs that support vulnerable groups in the population (e.g., older adults, children, people with disabilities, etc.; Marmor, Cook, & Scher, 1997). Thus, understanding what sorts of messages lead to attitude change toward such policies is important.

We manipulated the message frame as either episodic or thematic; the former features an older adult supporting abolishment, whereas the latter features statistics and broader arguments for the same outcome. Using this design, we made two key contributions to the literature: We test the idea that (a) episodic frames affect attitudes through enhancing perceptions of individual responsibility and accountability and (b) episodic frames have unintended effects on attitudes about groups, by integrating message effects work with research on intergroup contact. Next, we present a brief review of the relevant framing literature and related hypotheses.

Message framing effects 1: Effects on attitudes about social policy

One way that media messages give meaning to issues and connect them with the larger political environment is through framing. A frame "suggests how the issue should be thought about and understood" (Nelson & Kinder, 1996, p. 1057). News frames are an efficient way for journalists to classify information to communicate to audiences (Gitlin, 1978). These are often combined with audience frames which "guide individuals' processing of information" (Entman, 1993, p. 53).

News framing of political issues is often divided into two types: episodic and thematic. As defined by Iyengar (2011), "a thematic news frame … usually takes the form of in-depth background," and tends to use statistics. In contrast, an episodic news frame "depicts issues in terms of individual instances or specific events," often an individual's personal narrative (p. 253). Episodic frames are more engaging than thematic frames (Gross, 2008; Iyengar, 1991). This appeal has been explained as being a result of the personal connection to the individual in the episodic frame (Gross, 2008), the narrative arc of an episodic presentation (Iyengar, 1991), the ability of narrative to reduce reactance and counterarguing (Slater & Rouner, 2002), and the relatively digestible nature of the content (i.e., personal stories as compared to numerical information and broader generalizations; Iyengar, 1991).

Beyond these mechanisms, the presence of individual people in episodic frames may permit yet another mechanism to operate: a shifting of attributions of responsibility to the individual (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987; Iyengar, 1991). Episodic framing focuses on a particular individual's story, and hence frames the problem (and plausibly the solution) as an individual one (Iyengar, 1991). For messages advocating elimination of government social programs, framing at the individual level should enhance perceptions that the individual-level solutions are most relevant and, hence, should reduce favorability toward the collective-level solutions—i.e., large government programs. On the other hand, thematic framing of messages about social welfare focuses more on breadth and background information and frames the problem as a collective issue—one that has its locus and perhaps its solution at the governmental or societal level (Iyengar, 1991). Such messages should be less successful in gaining support for eliminating government programs.

This prediction is somewhat supported by prior framing research. Iyengar's (1987, 1991) series of experiments on crime, poverty, and unemployment found that when the issue was described in thematic terms, respondents assigned responsibility to societal factors such as failed governmental programs, political climate, or economic conditions. In contrast, when news coverage of poverty used episodic terms and dwelled on particular instances of poor people, respondents were more apt to hold the poor causally responsible. However, although those findings were directionally consistent with the hypotheses, they failed to achieve statistical significance.

Research to extend and clarify Iyengar's (1987, 1991) claims proposed that this distinction between episodic and thematic frames was overly simplistic and did not account for the multiple dimensions involved in the cognitive processing of frames. Shah, Kwak, Schmierbach, and Zubric (2004) declared that Iyengar's (1987, 1991) inconsistent findings may be the result of confounding two frame dimensions: An episodic message "favors specific instances over enduring problems," and "emphasizes individual situations over societal conditions" (p. 104). Therefore, a sense of shared responsibility to solve societal problems may be lessened as audiences encounter stories about *individuals* dealing with their personal struggles (Shah et al., 2004). Shah et al. extend Iyengar's work by testing the effects of mixtures of frames, showing that a combination of frame categories (societal gain/individual loss) led to a more detailed description of the issue.

Research also has expanded on the effects of *exemplars*, an important feature of episodic frames (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994; Lefevere, Swert, & Walgrave, 2012; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997; Tran, 2012). Brosius and Bathelt proposed that exemplars significantly affect how the message is perceived by the audience and found that the perception of the majority opinion was strongly influenced by exemplars. Exemplification theory proposes that the vividness of exemplars makes the message more memorable and triggers heuristic processing, giving exemplars an advantage over base-rate information in influencing perceptions of an issue (Tran, 2012; Zillmann

& Brosius, 2000). Heuristic processing tendencies are supported such that the vividness and quality (extremity of opinion) of the exemplar was more memorable than the base-rate information suggesting audiences "computed the perceived opinions by the number of pro- and con-exemplars" (Brosius & Bathelt, 1994, p. 73). Extending this line of research, Perry and Gonzenbach (1997) compared national and local exemplars, finding that opinion change followed the direction of the exemplars, and local exemplars were more effective at influencing the perception of public opinion about a local controversial issue. Thus, exemplars are tools that can be used to sway public opinion in a particular direction, generate perceptions of majority public opinion, and affect opinions about the future of an issue (Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997).

Newer research supported the idea that exemplar vividness influences issue perceptions. Popular exemplars were perceived as trustworthy and their accounts were seen as vivid; they were seen as representing public opinion and their message was taken more seriously than expert exemplars (Lefevere et al., 2012). Thus, popular exemplars had a greater effect on perceptions of the issue than experts. Tran (2012) found that exemplar vividness moderated the relationship between message valence and opinions such that valence has stronger effects with a vivid exemplar. Research consistently supported the notion that messages using exemplars have stronger influence on opinion than messages using base-rate information (Zillmann, 1999; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000).

Beyond discussions of individual exemplars, however, the broader issue of *how* exemplars influence processing of messages (relative to a lack of exemplars) remains somewhat unresolved. Iyengar suggested that exemplars and episodic frames led to more individual-level thinking than broader thematic frames, but his data did not fully support the idea, and he never explicitly examined the mediated pathway implied by that argument. In this study, we argue that attributions of responsibility at the individual (versus societal) level are an outcome of framing, and that they have attitudinal consequences. We predict that episodic frames should lead to individual attributions of responsibility, whereas thematic frames should lead to government/social attribution of responsibility. Thus, in the case of a message advocating abolition of Social Security:

> H1: An episodic frame will lead people to be more supportive of abolishing Social Security than a thematic frame.
> H2a: The effect in H1 will be mediated by attributions of individual responsibility such that an episodic frame will lead to higher attribution of individual responsibility for older adults' financial security in retirement than a thematic frame, and attributions of individual responsibility will increase desire to abolish Social Security.
> H2b: The effect in H1 will be mediated by attributions of government responsibility such that a thematic frame will lead to higher attribution of government responsibility for older adults' financial security in retirement than an episodic frame, and attributions of government responsibility will decrease desire to abolish Social Security.

Message framing effects 2: Effects on attitudes about older adults

In addition to the effects of the anti-Social Security messages on attitudes about the policy, these messages also have the potential to impact attitudes about older adults. Given that Social Security is a benefit program for older adults, it places older people in a position of dependency (i.e., as in need of government assistance), and given the financial problems perceived to stem from Social Security it also raises the possibility of older people being held responsible for broader financial challenges to the nation. Hence, we extend research on episodic and thematic framing effects by examining the unintended effects of messages on attitudes toward *groups* embedded in the messages. Specifically, we propose that the framing of political messages about cuts to Social Security may affect young adults' attitudes toward older adults in general.

Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory suggests that contact between members of different social groups will increase positive attitudes toward outgroup members. *Direct* contact (e.g., face-to-face conversation) allows people the opportunity to connect, develop mutual understanding and trust, and discover shared interests with outgroup members (Dovidio, Eller, & Hewstone, 2011). *Indirect* contact via media messages may also influence attitudes toward outgroup members (Ortiz & Harwood, 2007; Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005). Media messages about aging often support preexisting stereotypes about older adults, with few messages portraying positive or even adequate older occupational role models (Signorielli, 2004); such messages reinforce perceptions that older people are unproductive and do not contribute to society (Signorielli, 2004). Globally, media consumption has been shown to contribute to attitudes about aging (Levy, 2003).

Our episodic frames, which featured articulate and independent older people, offer an opportunity for indirect intergroup contact, an opportunity that is not present (nor would be expected) in the thematic frame. Through this indirect contact, young adults could gain personal knowledge and information about the particular older adult, broadening the scope for empathy with older adults in general and hence positive attitudes about the group. An individual experiencing indirect contact via an episodic frame has an opportunity to develop more positive attitudes toward older adults in general that is unavailable in the thematic frame.

> H3: An episodic frame will lead to more positive attitudes toward older adults than a thematic frame.

The older adult's narrative in our episodic message supported abolishing Social Security by discussing the values of individual hard work, independence, and self-reliance. Our society places a strong value on an individual's ability to work and maintain independence; an older adult who espouses such values and disdains government support should be perceived by young adults as accepting individual responsibility. Meta-analyses of attitudes toward younger and older adults have indicated there are generalized negative attitudes toward older adults across a wide range of measures: competence, attractiveness, health, hearing ability, demeanor (e.g., grouchy, critical, miserly), participation in activities, happiness, and desirability as company (Kite & Johnson, 1988; Kite, Stockdale, Whitely, & Johnson, 2005). Given

there are widely accepted negative stereotypes of older adults as incompetent (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005), exposure to responsible and independent older people should reduce endorsement of the stereotype and improve perceptions of older people in general. In other words, effects of our episodic message on more positive attitudes about older people should be mediated by perceptions of individual responsibility.

> H4: The effect in H3 will be mediated by attributions of individual responsibility such that an episodic frame will lead to higher attribution of individual responsibility for older adults' financial security in retirement than a thematic frame, and attributions of individual responsibility will lead to more positive attitudes toward older adults.

Thus, we aim to understand the impact of episodic versus thematic frames in influencing the attitudes targeted by the message *and* attitudes concerning the social group of which the episodic condition features an exemplar. Understanding how message frames can affect attitudes toward older adults and public policy programs like Social Security helps us (a) better understand the tensions implicit in messages about social programs in a political environment that favors self-reliance over government intervention, and (b) appreciate the effects of messages about social programs that are associated with specific social groups who may be present in messages about the programs (Silverstein & Parrott, 2001). Although we focus specifically on older adults and Social Security, our research has implications for messages about welfare that might feature poor people or disadvantaged ethnic groups, messages about education policy featuring children or college students, messages about health policy featuring people suffering from stigmatized medical problems, and myriad other situations in which social policies and social groups are intertwined.

Method

Participants and procedure

In total, 218 participants were recruited from communication classes at a large southwestern U.S. university to participate in a study about "evaluating news stories." Five participants over the age of 30 were excluded from data analysis (counterstereotypical episodic [1], control [2], and stereotypical episodic [3]), and an additional 16 participants were removed for failing a validation check (described later). Of the remaining 197 participants, 72.1% were female (27.9% male); ages ranged from 18 to 27 ($M = 20.77$, $SD = 1.32$), and 71.1% of the participants were White (11.2% Latino/Hispanic; 6.1% African American; 6.1% Asian American; and 5.6% Other).

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four online experimental conditions (stereotypical episodic, counterstereotypical episodic, thematic, or control) via an e-mail link provided by the investigator. All groups except the control read an article advocating the abolishment of Social Security. For the thematic group the article contained general background information supported by statistical figures. For the stereotypical episodic group the article was written from the perspective of a typical older adult. For the counterstereotypical episodic group, it was written from the perspective of an atypical older adult. The differentiation between the stereotypical

and counterstereotypical conditions is discussed in the messages section that follows; these two conditions were included primarily to provide a degree of message replication within the episodic condition, given the potential for massive variation in the nature of exemplars that might be present in such messages. The control group read an article about personality genes in bees. All participants completed a pre- and posttest questionnaire-containing measures described below.

Messages

Given that our message advocated abolition of Social Security, we elected to include exemplars that were broadly supportive of the theme that older adults are active, independent, self-supporting, and self-reliant, and hence not necessarily *in need of* programs like Social Security. We used two variations on this theme, one of which was more dramatic than the other: the stereotypical episodic ($n = 47$) and counterstereotypical episodic ($n = 51$) conditions. Both versions told the story of an individual retiree who supports the abolishment of Social Security. The conditions were distinguished using photos and information about the older adult's age, education, and reason for retirement.

In the *counterstereotypical episodic* condition, the older adult was a 73-year-old CEO retiring by choice after 47 years in the workforce. Counterstereotypicality in the character was represented through age (older than the average American retiree), title of CEO (high income bracket), education (MBA graduate degree), and retiring by choice (experienced financial success). The photo portrayed an older adult in suit and tie comfortably reclining in a high back, leather business chair. His chin is resting on his hand and he is looking at the camera with a wry smile. The appearance of the counterstereotypical older adult indicates power, status, and competence which often are not attributed to older adults in general.

The older adult in the *stereotypical episodic* condition was a 65-year-old being forced to retire due to memory problems. This character is more in line with aging stereotypes: He is retiring at an age which most of the population would connect with retirement, and having memory problems which are often attributed to age. Stereotypicality in the character is further represented by education (high school graduate) placing him in a lower income bracket when compared to the counterstereotypical older adult. The photo of the stereotypical older adult is a head shot of a man dressed in a casual golf shirt; he has a slight furrow in his brow which might indicate some confusion. The manipulation check for this distinction failed—the two older characters were viewed as equally typical of older people in general. Nonetheless, we retained the distinct groups in our analysis.

The thematic framed article ($n = 53$) used background information about Social Security to support the argument for abolition. It included statistics such as cost to maintain the program and contributing factors such as the increasing dependence of Americans on government programs. The control group read an Associated Press article about personality genes in bees that was comparable in length to the experimental articles and contained a photo ($n = 46$).

All experimental versions were comparable in length and provided the same background information on Social Security. They featured the same number of arguments against Social Security, and the language used was similar in all versions (e.g., *abolishment*, *trillion dollar liability*, *rapidly bankrupting our government*, and *unmanageable burden*). In addition, all versions contained a visual aid to enhance the manipulation (a statistical chart in the thematic condition, a photo in the episodic conditions). All articles were created using portions of existing editorials representative of the kind of coverage people might actually read online.

Our approach to framing emphasized precision such that facts presented about Social Security were maintained across conditions using similar language. By holding content constant, internal validity is increased by "restricting framing very narrowly to an effect of presentation and modality" (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007, p. 10). However, external validity may be limited because effects are more likely due to a combination of both content and framing (Scheufele, 2000).

Measures
All measures were completed after exposure to the message, except as noted.

Subject screening
To ensure participants read the articles, there were two multiple choice questions regarding the content of the articles. Sixteen respondents answered one or both of the validity questions incorrectly and were removed from data analysis (thematic (1), counterstereotypical episodic (2), stereotypical episodic (5), and control (8)). A review of these responses in the control condition showed incorrect responses varied and indicated no systematic bias. Therefore, we concluded that these participants were unmotivated to participate mindfully in the study, perhaps due to a lack of interest in the control message topic.

Attitudes toward older adults
These attitudes were measured using the General Evaluation Scale (Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997). Participants rated their feelings about older adults (people 65 and older) on six items (*negative*, *warmth*, *suspicious*, *friendly*, *respect*, and *disgust*) using a 5-point Likert-type scale where higher scores indicate more positive attitudes toward older adults (Harwood, Hewstone, Paolini & Voci, 2005; α = .76).

Attitudes toward Social Security
Respondents were provided basic information to define Social Security from the Administration's Website (www.ssa.gov) prior to completing a single-item pretest measure of attitudes toward Social Security embedded in other measures (single item, 1–10, disfavor vs. favor the Social Security system). In the posttest, attitudes were measured using five items on a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) (e.g., "Social Security is not important for future generations" (reverse coded); "older adults should have access to Social Security"). Existing measures could

not be located so items were created for this study ($\alpha = .73$); high scores indicate positive attitudes about Social Security.

Attribution of responsibility
Participants responded to two single-item questions on Likert-type scales from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*a great deal*): "How much responsibility do older adults have for financing their own retirement needs?" and "How much responsibility does the government have for supplementing older adults' retirement needs?"

Data analysis
Descriptive statistics and information about statistical transformations are provided in Table 1. Pretest attitudes toward Social Security, race (coded White/not White), and political affiliation (coded Democrat/not Democrat) were used as covariates in all data analyses. To test hypotheses of mean differences, one-way analyses of variance with covariates (ANCOVAs) were performed to compare the four conditions. Post-hoc Tukey's least significant difference (LSD) analyses were performed to test pairwise differences. Mediator hypotheses were tested via Hayes' PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) incorporating dummy codes for *both* the stereotypical and counterstereotypical (relative to thematic) conditions as predictors, attributions of individual responsibility and attributions of government responsibility as mediators, and attitudes toward Social Security or attitudes toward older adults as outcome variables. Each outcome variable model was run twice including one of the dummy codes as a predictor and the other as a covariate in order to assess the indirect effects for each. Additionally, the attitude measures were included as potential mediators (i.e., attitudes toward older adults was used as a mediator when Social Security attitudes was the outcome and vice versa) which (a) controls for any intercorrelation between the attitude measures, and (b) allows us to consider the direction of causality. The control group was not included in tests of mediator effects.

Results

For analyses involving attitudes toward older adults, covariates of pretest attitudes about Social Security, race, and political affiliation were not significant predictors. For analyses involving Social Security attitudes, political affiliation was typically a significant predictor (explaining about 7% of the variance) as were preexisting attitudes about Social Security (explaining about 12% of the variance). Race was not a significant predictor. In the subsequent reports, these covariates are not reported. Differences across conditions and descriptive statistics for the major study variables are reported in Table 1, and correlations related to the hypotheses are presented in Table 2. All confidence intervals are 95% bias corrected.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that the episodic frames would lead people to be less supportive of Social Security than a thematic frame. The four groups differed significantly

Table 1 Raw Means, Standard Deviations, and Descriptive Statistics for the Major Study Variables

Variable	CST-Episodic M (SD)	ST-Episodic M (SD)	Thematic M (SD)	Control M (SD)	Theoretical Range	Observed Range
Attitudes toward Social Security	3.58 (.60)[a]	3.48 (.52)[a]	3.81 (.63)[b]	3.74 (.59)[b]	1.00 – 5.00	2.00 – 5.00
Attitudes toward older adults	0.65 (.11)[a]	0.67 (.10)[ab]	0.70 (.12)[b]	0.67 (.12)[ab]	0.33 – 1.00	0.33 – 1.00
Individual attribution mediator	4.12 (.79)[a]	3.87 (.99)[ab]	3.62 (.79)[b]	3.96 (.87)[a]	1.00 – 5.00	2.00 – 5.00
Government attribution mediator	3.08 (.94)[a]	3.43 (.93)[b]	3.43 (.89)[b]	3.39 (.95)[ab]	1.00 – 5.00	1.00 – 5.00

Note: $N = 197$. CST = countersterotypical; ST = stereotypical. Log transformations to obtain appropriate skewness ranges were performed on attitudes toward older adults. Means not sharing subscripts across rows are significantly different ($p < .05$), except for the following where the difference was marginally significant ($p < .10$): the differences between the CST-Episodic and Control conditions for attitudes toward Social Security, and the Thematic and Control conditions for the individual attributions mediator. The overall F statistic is significant for attitudes toward Social Security and individual attributions; it is nonsignificant for the other two analyses.

Table 2 Correlation Matrix for Major Study Variables

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
1. Attitudes toward older adults	—			
2. Attitudes toward Social Security	.10	—		
3. Individual attribution	.07	−.18[**]	—	
4. Government attribution	−.003	.25[**]	−.27[**]	—

Note: $N = 197$.
[**]$p < .01$

in their posttest attitudes toward Social Security, $F(3, 190) = 4.43$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Tukey's pairwise comparisons indicated that the stereotypical and counterstereotypical episodic groups had significantly lower support of Social Security than the thematic group, and did not differ from each other (Table 1). The stereotypical episodic group had significantly lower support of Social Security than the control group; the corresponding difference for the counterstereotypical episodic group was marginally significant. Results supported the hypothesis.
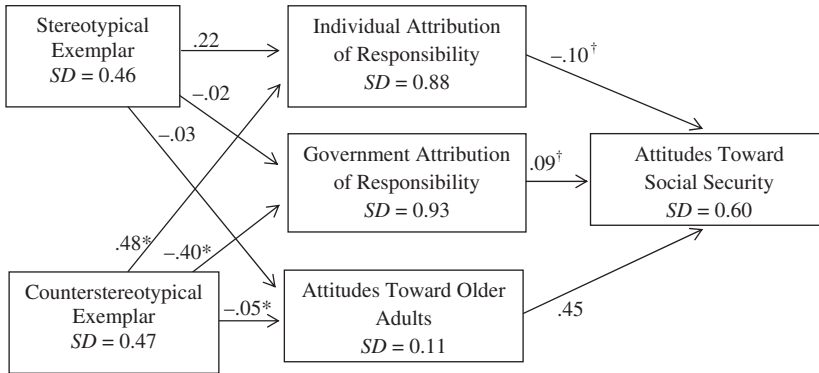
Figure 1 Results of regression analysis showing that the effect of counterstereotypical message frame on attitudes toward Social Security is mediated by individual attribution of responsibility and government attribution of responsibility. The numbers are unstandardized regression coefficients. Controlling for preexisting attitudes toward Social Security, race, and political affiliation did not affect the results. $*p < .05$, $†p > .08$, $N = 151$.

Hypothesis 2a predicted that the effect in H1 was mediated by attributions of individual responsibility, and Hypothesis 2b predicted that the effect in H1 was mediated by attributions of government responsibility. Results showed two significant mediated pathways in the model: one from the counterstereotypical frame, through attributions of individual responsibility, to the outcome, CI [−0.138, −0.003], and another from the counterstereotypical frame, through attributions of government responsibility, to the outcome, CI [−0.1190, −0.0004].

As shown in Figure 1, participants in the counterstereotypical episodic condition attributed more responsibility to individuals to save for retirement than did those in the thematic condition, and individual attributions of responsibility resulted in reduced support for Social Security. Conversely, participants in the thematic condition attributed more responsibility to the government to provide for retirement than did those in the counterstereotypical episodic condition, and government attributions of responsibility resulted in increased support for Social Security. These mediated paths are also significant in simpler models incorporating a single mediator and a simple contrast of stereotypical and counterstereotypical conditions. The direct path from counterstereotypical frame to the outcome was not significant after inclusion of the mediators, CI [−0.40, 0.04], suggesting that attributions fully mediate the effect.

The ratio of indirect to total effect indicates that approximately 24% of the *total effect* of the counterstereotypical frame on attitudes toward Social Security is carried *through* individual attributions (the mediator), and the overall R^2 mediating effect size indicates that 2.64% of the total variance in attitudes toward Social Security is explained via the mediated pathway. Further, approximately 19% of the *total effect* of the counterstereotypical frame on attitudes toward Social Security is carried *through* government attributions, and the overall R^2 mediating effect size indicates that 2.05%

of the total variance in attitudes toward Social Security is explained via the mediated pathway (Preacher & Kelley, 2011). Although these effect sizes are small, they are not trivial: Effects of this size or smaller are common in media effects research, including work on framing (e.g., O'Keefe and Jensen's 2007 meta-analysis of 93 studies shows an effect of $r = .03$ ($r^2 = .0009$) for the effects of gain/loss frames on health behaviors).

No mediation effects were significant for the comparison of the stereotypical episodic versus thematic conditions: attributions of individual responsibility CI [−0.10, 0.01]; and, attributions of government responsibility CI [−0.06, 0.03]. Attitudes toward older adults were not a significant mediator of the effects of either condition: counterstereotypical CI [−0.09, 0.01]; stereotypical CI [−0.08, 0.01]. Results supported Hypotheses 2a and 2b only for the counterstereotypical episodic condition.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the episodic frames would lead to more positive attitudes toward older adults than the thematic frame. The stereotypical episodic, counterstereotypical episodic, thematic, and control groups did not differ significantly $F(3, 190) = 1.65$, *ns*. A contrast of the counterstereotypical episodic and thematic conditions was significant, $F(1, 99) = 4.56$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .04$, but there was no significant difference between the stereotypical episodic and thematic conditions. Those in both episodic conditions reported more negative attitudes about older people than those in the thematic condition (see Table 1 for means), which contradicts H3. However, the results of H4 suggest that the logic underlying the hypothesis was partially correct.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that the effect in H3 was mediated by attributions of individual responsibility. Analysis indicates there is one significant mediated pathway in the model from the counterstereotypical frame, through attributions of individual responsibility, to the outcome, CI [0.001, 0.030]. As shown in Figure 2, participants in the counterstereotypical episodic condition attributed more responsibility to individuals to save for retirement than those in the thematic condition, and individual attributions resulted in more positive attitudes toward older adults. The relationship between counterstereotypical message frame and attitudes toward older adults remained significant (and negative) after inclusion of the mediator, CI [−0.10, −0.01]. This mediated path is also significant in a simpler model incorporating a single mediator and a simple contrast of stereotypical and counterstereotypical conditions. The ratio of indirect to total effect indicates that 26% of the *total effect* of the counterstereotypical frame on attitudes toward older adults is carried *through* individual attributions (the mediator), and the overall R^2 mediating effect size indicates that 1.98% of the total variance in attitudes toward older adults is explained via the mediated pathway.

As suggested previously, the positive indirect effects support the logic of H3, even though the total effects did not support H3. Counterstereotypical episodic frames about Social Security make attitudes about older adults worse (total effect), but they also improve attitudes about older adults *through* attributions of individual responsibility for retirement planning. No other mediation effects were significant: stereotypical episodic versus thematic conditions through attributions of individual
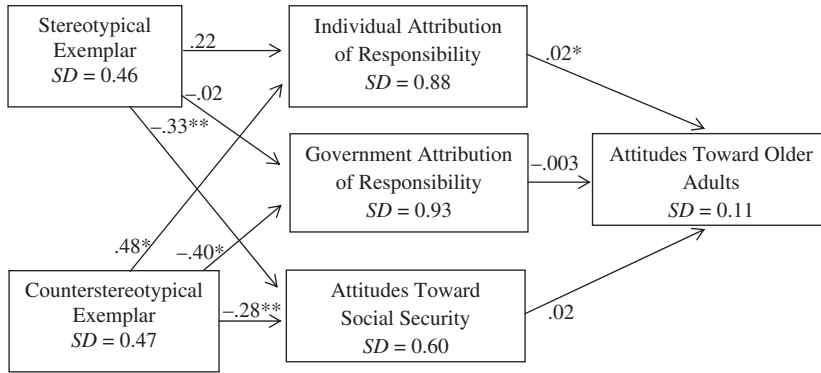
Figure 2 Results of regression analysis showing that the effect of counterstereotypical message frame on attitudes toward older adults is mediated by individual attribution of responsibility. The numbers are unstandardized regression coefficients. Controlling for preexisting attitudes toward Social Security, race, and political affiliation did not affect the results. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$, $N = 151$.

responsibility, CI [−0.002, 0.019]; as well as both conditions through attributions of government responsibility: counterstereotypical CI [−0.007, 0.013], stereotypical CI [−0.004, 0.005]; and attitudes toward Social Security: counterstereotypical CI [−0.024, 0.002] or, stereotypical CI [−0.022, 0.003].

Discussion

We proposed that the framing of political messages has effects on policy attitudes, but also unintended effects on attitudes toward the beneficiaries of the policy; we explored attributions of responsibility as a theoretically derived mediator of these effects. The effects were explored in the context of an *anti*-Social Security message.

Effects on policy attitudes
Message frame directly affected respondents' attitudes toward Social Security—those in the episodic conditions were more negative about Social Security than those in the thematic or control conditions. For the comparison of the counterstereotypical episodic versus thematic conditions, this effect was mediated by both individual and government attribution of responsibility for retirement planning. This provides the first evidence for personal responsibility as a mediator of episodic framing effects, an effect first hypothesized by Iyengar (1987) who suggested that episodic frames encourage individualist perspectives on issues.

As predicted, young adults in the counterstereotypical episodic condition rated individual responsibility significantly higher than the thematic condition—a message-consistent ideology that supports the message. This translated into respondents following the opinion of the exemplar by rating attitudes toward Social Security lower, indicating the exemplar affected perceptions of the message (Brosius & Bathelt,

1994; Perry & Gonzenbach, 1997). We believe our work is the first to explicitly model this process and demonstrate that individualist orientation mediates the effects of episodic frames on attitudes (Iyengar, 1991).

In a complementary effect, the episodic stereotypical condition also reduced perceptions of government responsibility, and lowered perceptions of government responsibility were associated with more negative attitudes toward the policy. In other words, individual and collective responsibility attributions both independently mediated the effects of an episodic manipulation. However, this is not a complete confirmation of Iyengar (1991) as we discuss next.

The mediation pattern occurred for the *counter*stereotypical episodic condition, but not for the *stereotypical* episodic group. This may indicate the vividness of the counterstereotypical older adult exemplar makes the message more memorable, as exemplification theory suggests (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). In particular, in the context of a message advocating less support for older adults, our counterstereotypical exemplar was a better embodiment of the message—he was presented as wealthy, successful, and highly competent, and hence exemplified precisely the type of older person for whom the message would make sense. In contrast, the stereotypical exemplar was experiencing age-related decline (memory problems) and hence although he was verbally making the case for not supporting older adults, he actually exemplified a reason why support for older adults might be necessary. Clearly our current data are only suggestive, but they indicate that a greater match between exemplar circumstances and argument content should lead to greater persuasiveness. This is somewhat similar to Perry and Gonzenbach's (1997) finding that local exemplars are more powerful in influencing opinion on local issues; they have better "fit" to those issues. More generally, some exemplars are clearly better than others (Lefevere et al., 2012).

Although our results show full mediation, globally they do not explain a large amount of variance. Therefore, we should consider other mediating factors that might be operating simultaneously. In particular, work on entertainment overcoming resistance (Moyer-Gusé, 2008) and transportation (Slater & Rouner, 2002) suggests that episodic messages reduce counterarguing or reactance and "entertain" the reader into submission. Depending on the specific message and outcome, resistance-reduction mediators and individual-societal attribution mediators might complement each other in influencing attitudes. In other cases, they might operate in opposition. For instance, Niederdeppe, Shapiro, and Porticella (2011) used messages that emphasized external causes of obesity. Their episodic messages were more persuasive (for a subset of their sample), an effect that was mediated by reduced counterarguing: Political liberals were more supportive of societal solutions to obesity problems in a narrative (episodic) condition.

Our results and Iyengar's theorizing would suggest that an individual-societal attribution-mediated path would (simultaneously) operate in the opposite direction in Niederdeppe et al. (2011) data, leading to *less* support for societal solutions in the episodic condition. In this context, we find it telling that the most effective message overall in Niederdeppe et al.'s (2011) study is one that combines episodic

and thematic features, perhaps short-circuiting the type of mediated pathway that we hypothesize. Future work should simultaneously examine contradictory mediators for messages with persuasive goals that involve both individual and societal solutions.

Our mediation results suggest that Iyengar's (1991) focus on the effect of attributions is not entirely warranted. Only a small portion of the effect of thematic versus episodic framing results from perceptions of attribution of responsibility. Furthermore, not all episodic frames are equivalent as evidenced by differing results for the two episodic exemplars. This clearly suggests that additional mechanisms such as specific characteristics of the exemplar are important in this process.

We suspect additional processes favoring the episodic frame derive from young people's use of personal news sources. This bias should lead people to pay more attention to episodic versus thematic news frames; as such they might read episodic frames more carefully and retain the arguments better. Episodic frames also allow for perspective taking with the characters in the stories—presumably a characteristic of personal news stories. Resistance to the "abolish" Social Security message is likely to be grounded in the perception that older adults need and want Social Security. Reading a story in which a *specific* older adult opposes that notion reduces this perception.

Effects on attitudes toward groups

Our results also show an unintended effect of framing on attitudes toward older adults. Counterstereotypical episodic framing of messages advocating abolishing Social Security worsened attitudes about older adults (compared to thematic frames) as a direct effect. However, the same frame also increased attributions of individual responsibility which in turn improved attitudes about older adults. This supports our general idea that policy messages have unintended effects on attitudes toward the policy's prime beneficiaries. However, the direction of the direct effect is the opposite of our predictions; we expected exposure to an independent and competent older adult to improve attitudes.

Perhaps our respondents did not *like* the particular older adults in either of our episodic conditions—contact with disliked outgroup individuals is not expected to yield positive attitudinal outcomes (Paolini, Harwood, & Rubin, 2010). Our data suggest a fairly tepid level of liking for the characters in the episodic conditions ($M = 2.55$, $SD = .85$, on a $1-5$ scale, where high scores indicate more liking; no difference between the two conditions). The characters may have been downgraded for speaking out against their in-group's interests, or simply for failing to confirm respondents' "worldviews" concerning older adults (e.g., by being moderately competent and independent; Glick & Fiske, 2001). Another possibility is that when young people see older people apparently arguing against their group's interest that they view older adults as not unified on this issue, and perceptions of disagreement among the policy's beneficiaries result in negative attitudes about the group (e.g., "they're disorganized").

That said, the mediator effects here provided support for our underlying logic: Respondents in the counterstereotypical episodic condition attributed more responsibility to individuals to save for retirement, which led to more positive attitudes toward older adults. In other words, the indirect effect supported the direction that we had predicted for this effect and demonstrates that episodic policy messages can have implications for members of policy-relevant groups.

Limitations and future directions

A limitation in this study is the use of single-item measures to explore individual and government attributions of responsibility as mediators. No scales were found in a search for measures of individual and government responsibility, so single-item measures were created to explore the concept for this study. Creating multi-item scales for use in future studies would benefit the literature. Another limitation is the lack of a pro-Social Security condition in the experiment. Demonstrating that episodic frames perform *worse* for a pro-Social Security message, and that that effect is also mediated by individual attributions is the next building block in the argument we make here. A more diverse sample in terms of age and work experience would benefit future investigations into moderators of our effects: Older respondents with more work experience should be more engaged with the issue and have more complex perceptions of aging and older adults (Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994).

Finally, we acknowledge the limitations of mediated models in examining causality throughout the model. Specifically, we are confident in the causal effects of our independent variable on the mediator (because it is an experimental manipulation), but note that the causal effects of the mediator on the dependent variable are inferred from what are effectively correlational data; it is possible. Although not consistent with our theoretical position, there might be effects in the reverse direction (DV to mediator). This speaks to the need for separate work experimentally manipulating individual and governmental attributions to examine their effects on policy attitudes.

Our study provides a valuable addition to framing research in the context of political message effects on attitudes. We show how specific political message frames related to public policies are associated with attitudes toward those policies and the people who are the target of the policies, partially supporting Iyengar's claims. However, there are clearly other factors also involved, as discussed in more recent work (Lefevere et al., 2012; Shah et al. (2004); Tran, 2012). This enhances the framing literature by demonstrating the role of attribution of responsibility as a potential mediator in the attitudinal effects of frames, while simultaneously drawing attention to the fact that additional mediators also operate in this process.

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